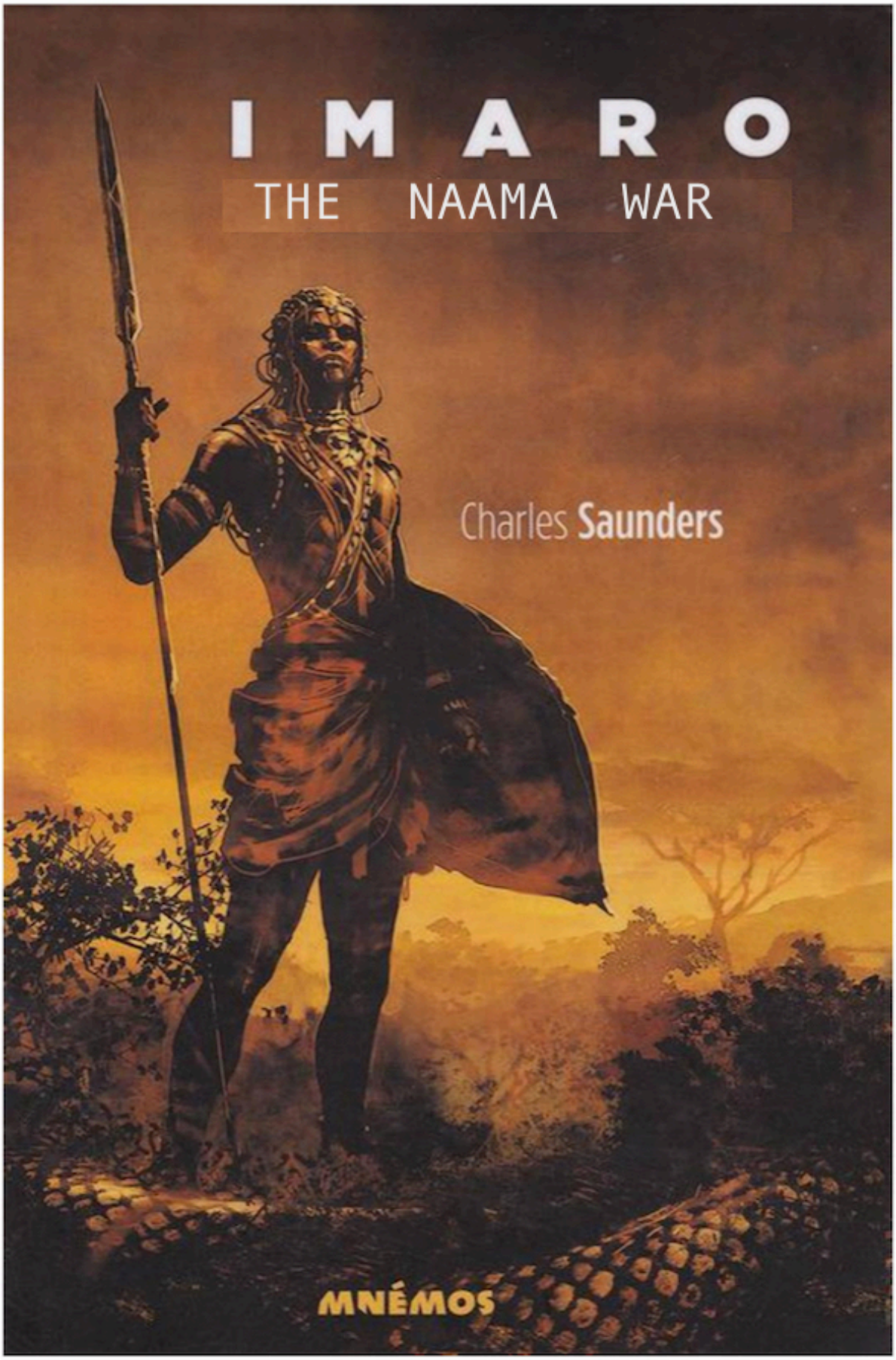
IMARO
THE NAAMA WAR
Charles Saunders
MNÉMOS

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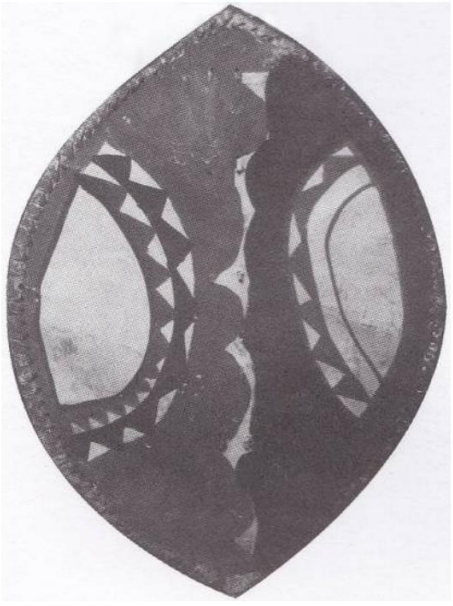
MNÉMOS

NOTE

This is not the original text of the novel. It comes from a French translation that was then translated back into English. So while the story is likely the same as in the original text, it is hard to imagine that all the specifics of Charles Saunders' voice in in the original English have been maintained.

THE NAAMA WAR



BOOK 4

1.

L'EMBIZWENI

Jua the sun bathed the Abamba Highlands in its golden glow. This hilly region was carpeted with thick grass and dotted with the red patches of flowering aloes and cinnamon trees. Like stone monuments, rocky outcrops pierced the sides of some hills.

Long lines of Ngwika walked on centuries-old paths that snaked between the hills. They were prepared for war, with their tanned leather shields and their broad-bladed combat spears. The women were dressed ***in isikaka*** – skirts – layered on, and wearing what looked like a turban. Children of both sexes ferried fat cattle and hopping goats down the slopes.

The hill paths were crowded with people belonging to perhaps twenty Ngwika clans, not to mention allied tribes such as the Phondo, who came from the south, or the Thembu, who came from the west. All had a single destination: Galeka, the ***kraal*** of the ***nkosi*** – of the king – of the Ngwika. The ***nkosi*** had summoned all the Ngwika and their neighbors to an ***embizweni :*** a general gathering.

It was rare to ask for an ***embizweni.*** A declaration of war, the appointment or death of a ***nkosi,*** or the announcement that witches had been unearthed, were the reasons given most often to justify such a gathering.

The last had taken place when the ***nkosi*** Mkwayo had returned to the Highlands after becoming ***monomatapa*** of the kingdom of Amanyani, far to the north, across the Zimbazi River. Mkwayo now ruled over all of Maguvurunde, a fertile region teeming with stone cities that had previously been hostile to the Abamba people. Mkwayo had returned to take part in the ceremonies which marked the accession of his brother, Nkwana, to the position of ***nkosi,*** left vacant after his departure.

Nkwana in turn had just summoned an ***embizweni*** to welcome a long-departed son of Mkwayo to the tribe.
For more than twenty rains, the latter had remained without news of the child he had conceived with Katisa, the one who was now his queen, the ***dakamatapa.*** She had taken the child to be raised among her people, the Ilyassai, who lived in the savannah of distant Tamburure. Katisa had returned later, but without her son.

The lost son had recently arrived in Maguvurunde. Recognized and welcomed by his parents, he was now in the Ngwika region to be honored by his father's people. This was the reason why Ngwika, Phondo, Thembu and others progressed through the hills.
All wanted to pay homage to the visitor who was ***izizalwana,*** “from the same family as”, two of the greatest ***nkosi.***

They were surprised at the name of Mkwayo's son, a name that did not resemble no other in the Abamba Highlands: Imaro.

Galeka's mansions clung like vines to the slopes of the region known as the Rippled Hills. Known locally as ***itembesos,*** the round dwellings were made from stacked clods, and their roofs were grass.

Like natural growths, the ***itembisos*** were scattered in scattered clusters on the many hills streaked with deep crevasses that gave their name to the region. It was one of Imaro's ancestors who had called them that, when the Ngwika arrived in the country, there were hundreds of rains of that.

At the foot of the Rippled Hills was a plain where lush grass grew, before the terrain rose again to form the Blood Hills, so named for the profusion of red aloe growing on their slopes. The plain that separated the two sets of hills served as pasture and field for the people of Galeka. It was there that ***the embizweni was celebrated.***

The Ngwika were already crowding there, even if not all of them had yet responded to Nkwana's call. But no one feared the ***nkosi*** 's wrath if they arrived after the festivities had begun, for ***the embizweni*** had begun the moment Imaro had arrived among them, and it would continue for several more days.

Laughing, singing, dancing… the Ngwika celebrated it with greater abandon than usual. For the Highlands were the prey of

trouble, and these festivities were likely to be the last opportunity for entertainment for quite some time.

Amid rumbling drums and a sea of sweaty bodies swaying their hips, Imaro sat between the two most important figures in Ngwika country. To his right was his uncle Nkwana, the ***nkosi,*** a powerfully built, though portly, man approaching old age. On his left, Solosha, eldest son of Nkwana, and cousin of Imaro.

Solosha was about the same age as Imaro, and Nkwana had entrusted him with the task of teaching his cousin the manners of the Ngwika. Imaro had now been living among his father's people for two weeks, and Solosha had used that time to explain to him the nuances of ***umetsho,*** the good manners expected of all Ngwika. He also learned what was ***ma-conini,*** that is to say taboo, forbidden or simply looked upon with suspicion. His rudimentary knowledge of the language sometimes made Imaro's task difficult.

He was, however, making progress. Among other things, he had learned that it was ***ma-conini*** to drink the milk of cows belonging to people who were not of his family. This was a little taboo that was easy to conceive. The Ilyassai, who were also herders, had the same. On the other hand, he had trouble understanding ***how ma-conini*** it was for a woman to step over a stick. When he pressed Solosha for an explanation, the Ngwika just shrugged and said, “It's our custom, ***izizalwana.***

"So ***umetsho*** and ***ma-conini*** are sometimes the same thing?" Imaro asked.

Solosha smiled and nodded. The two cousins managed to understand each other quite well, even if Imaro had difficulty with the clicks of the tongue which characterized the Ngwika dialect and that of the other Abamba tribes, for that matter.

“Don't worry, ***izizalwana,*** ” Solosha said when Imaro voiced his irritation at not being able to pronounce the words correctly. Only someone who has mastered Ngwika since childhood is able to click his tongue properly. But I understand you when you speak.

The rhythmic rumble of wooden sticks on the taut skin of the drums brought Imaro's thoughts back to ***the embizweni.*** Those of the participants who did not dance were seated on rugs decorated with different motifs depending on the clans. Filled earthenware pitchers

of utywala, a thick yellow beer, passed from rug to rug as the dancers swung their hips. Bowls filled with food, mainly fruits and nuts, were also exchanged. The actual celebration wouldn't start until much later, after the dances were over.

The dancers consisted largely of young, unmarried men and women. They moved gracefully between the mats, never letting their hips or feet touch those who were seated.

Solosha passed a jug ***of utywala*** to Imaro, who lifted it to his mouth and sipped. The beer was thicker than many of the stews he had swallowed on his travels, and it burned his throat on the way down. Wiping his mouth with one hand, he passed the half-empty jug to Nkwana. The old man smiled before draining the rest of the beer in one gulp.

Imaro smiled back. Although he was obviously a foreigner, the Ngwikas had adopted him as if he had lived among them since birth. Indeed, when Nkwana had introduced Imaro to Solosha, the young man had said, “If you had been raised here, ***izizalwana,*** we would have undergone our rite of passage to adulthood together, and you would have been my brother. But we will still be brothers. »

At first, Imaro had been skeptical of the sincerity of the reception given to him by the Ngwika. He had been raised by his mother's people, the Ilyassai, and since her mother, Katisa, had never told them who the child's father was, they had exiled her from the tribe. Imaro, aged five rains at the time, had stayed with the Ilyassai for reasons he had only recently discovered. It was while venturing into the Maguvurunde that he had learned that his mother was still alive, and that his father was the monomatapa.

The Ilyassai had given Imaro the nickname “son of no father” and his childhood had been an ordeal that only his iron will had allowed him to survive.

He didn't look like his mother's people, tall, lean people with narrow features and mahogany skin. Imaro, with his earth-colored skin, broad face, and powerful frame, looked more like his father's people than his mother's. But he had never met his equal before coming across some Abamba in Maguvurunde.

Solosha nudged Imaro in the ribs to snap him out of his reverie.

"Look at that one, ***izizalwana,*** " he said mischievously. I think she likes you.

Imaro looked up and saw a young Ngwika dancing in front of the carpet. Her hips circled as she swayed to the beat of the drums. Her ***isikaka,*** her long skirt dyed orange ocher and decorated with pearls, clapped on and flew from her legs, slapping in a distinct rhythm, which came in counterpoint to that of the drums.

Necklaces of pearls and shells bounced off her bare chest.
She had taken off her headdress for the dance, revealing a rather short curly mane. In the space between his eyebrows and his nose, you could see a strip of ocher applied to his skin.

While dancing, she gave Imaro a smile.

"Her name is Nomvula," Solosha said.

Imaro listened carefully to catch the end of the name. Among the Ngwika, all women's names began with "No", which meant "wife of". As for "Mvula", it meant "beauty". Hence, “woman of beauty”.

As Imaro gazed at the young woman's body and her seductive smile, it was easy for him to agree with those who had named her that.

“I have two wives, ***izizalwana,” Solosha*** teased. And my father had eight, the last time he had the whim to count them. You are the only person sitting on this rug who is not married. Therefore, Nomvula can only dance for you...

Solosha and Nkwana exchanged a knowing chuckle. Imaro frowned. But the humor of his companions was not the reason for his annoyance...

Imaro once had a wife named Tanisha, and a son, Kilewo. He had talked a lot about them in Nkwana and Solosha, like all he had been able to accomplish in the twenty-five rains only that had fallen since his birth. He had slain warriors, beasts and monsters spawned by the unholy sorcery of the Mashataan, the God-Demons that all feared... all but him. But the Naama, who worshiped the Mashataan, fought back. They had sent one of their own,

a wizard named Bohu, to kill Tanisha and Kilewo. Which Bohu had done, striking in a manner as brutal as it was horrible.

Imaro had sworn to find Bohu and kill him, just as the nations of the North and East had sworn to destroy the land of the Naama, which lay many days' march south of the Abamba Highlands.

He did not know that what he had confided to his uncle and his cousin was going to be repeated by the ***imbongi,*** the praise-poets of the Ngwika. During ***the embizweni,*** the latter had begun by incensing Mkwayo, Imaro's father, for having put an end to the immemorial enmity between the Abamba and the inhabitants of the North by sending an ***impi,*** a regiment, of Ngwika warriors on the opposite bank of the Zimbazi to come to the aid of the Amanyani, then at war with two other kingdoms of Maguvurunc In the wake of his victory, Mkwayo had become a monomatapa, his predecessor having died in battle. During the rains that followed, Mkwayo gradually conquered the other Maguvurunde kingdoms. And now he ruled over an empire, of which Imaro was the heir.

The ***imbongi*** had also sung the praises of Nkwana, who had defended the Ngwika against the attacks of the Tsubi, who slaughtered cattle and set fire to crops, blinded by their superstitions that the gods would replace missing food with "cattle from the skies" and seeds of immortality. Nkwana was preparing his people for war against the Mtatwa who, under Shingane's command, were carving out a kingdom of blood and terror in the eastern part of the Highlands.

Everyone suspected the Naama, through Bohu, to be at the origin troubles caused by the Tsubi and the Mtatwa.

But the one that the praise-poets had celebrated the longest was Imaro, son of Mkwayo. With his bare hands, Imaro had killed an Erriten, a Great Adept of the Mashataan. And he had also killed another who was almost, but not quite, an Erriten. Before long, the warrior would leave Galeka to hunt down Bohu, who had killed his wife and child. Revenge was not only his mission; it was his only reason for living.

The songs of the ***imbongi*** had taught Nomvula, and everyone in Galeka, that Imaro was without a wife. But no one knew that he had possessed no woman since the day he saw the decapitated corpse of

Tanisha lying next to Kilewo's, in their home in distant Cush.

"Dance with her, Imaro," Nkwana urged, half-serious, half-amused. It ***'s ma-conini*** to let a woman like Nomvula dance alone for so long.

Imaro sat up. Despite the prodigious amount ***of utywala*** he had ingested, his movements were firm and confident. Although the Ngwika, like most Abamba, were quite tall and stout, Imaro's stature remained unusual even for them. Some Ngwika exceeded him in height, but none equaled his power and his lion's frame.

He had adopted the typical Ngwika outfit, a buffalo leather loincloth that came down to his knees at the back and was reduced to a simple thong at the front. He wore a string of blood-colored pearls called ***ubu-hlalu as a necklace. The ubu-hlalu*** was the mark of the warrior who killed an enemy in battle. Imaro had killed more enemies than he could remember.

Her ***ingubo,*** a thick orange blanket, lay on the carpet. ***The ingubo*** was only needed after dark, when the air was surprisingly chilly with the icy breezes blowing in from the hills.

Eyes turned to the ground in a deferential attitude, Nomvula took Imaro by the hand and led him after her.

- Do you think it's the one he needs? Solosha asked her father.

"I don't know," Nkwana replied. But he will have to stop mourning his dead wife at some point. And if there's one that could make me forget all my women, living or dead, it's Nomvula!

"Don't let anyone hear you say that," Solosha said, smiling. Not if you want to live!

“Since you're the only one who can teach them, my son, I don't think I'm risking anything.

The two men burst into thunderous laughter and shared another ***pitcher of utywala.***

Imaro and Nomvula slipped easily among the dancers. Men and women faced each other. The women swayed their hips slowly, emphasizing the flexibility of their bodies and their limbs. The men's gestures were less subtle. They hurled themselves at the women, then leapt back; they pounded the ground with their feet, jumped,

pumped out their chests and flexed their biceps in response to the aggressive rhythm of the drums.

Imaro hadn't had time to learn all the intricacies of the ngwika dances, but he was doing well enough for Nomvula, who literally stared at the warrior.

It's abamba enough, she thought. Abamba was the common name for the tribes of semi-nomadic herders who inhabited the hilly region nestled between Maguvurunde in the north and Naama in the south. The Abamba traits of Imaro's father stood out distinctly more than those of his mother's people, the Ilyassai.

Does he think of me? Nomvula wondered. She was not yet promised to any man and, therefore, could enjoy the freedom offered to unmarried men and women during moments of celebrations such as ***the embizweni.***

He still misses his wife, she supposed as she studied his blank expression. She had wanted to be in his arms the second she had seen him enter Galeka with the ***nkosi*** and his warriors.

For a time, Nomvula had hoped to become Solosha's wife. But this hope had been dashed when the son of the ***nkosi*** had paid the ***lobola*** – the dowry – to a woman named Nonjaji. Solosha had signified that he would not take an additional wife until he grew older and acquired more cattle, by which the Abamba tribes measured an individual's wealth.

Nomvula's disappointment had been bitter and deep. But now Imaro was there...

I'm going to make him forget his wife gone forever, Nomvula promised herself as she approached as close to him as the dance steps would allow. Imaro was only partially aware of Nomvula and her charms. In the rhythmic movements of the dance he found respite from the troubles that troubled him even when he relished the friendliness of his father's people.

He had revealed many things to Nkwana and Solosha, but had not told them everything, especially about his lineage. He hadn't told them about his mother's encounter with a Cloud Strider before he was born, as he himself wasn't sure he could accept the full implications of that episode.

The Cloud Striders were deities engaged in an age-old struggle with the Mashataan. Pregnant by Imaro, Katisa had been touched by one of these Striders. And this simple contact had altered his unborn child, had made him more than human. He had become a weapon in the struggle between the Cushites, worshiping the Cloud Walkers, and the Naama, who served the Mashataan.

The queen of Cush, who was called the ***kandisa,*** had explained to Imaro that he had to restore the ***chephet,*** the balance of power between Cloud Striders and Mashataan. She had told him that he had to put an end to the threat of Bohu, who was to the Mashataan what Imaro was to the Cloud Striders. In the meantime, the kandisa would fight against the Naama, who had embarked on a war of invasion against the eastern coast kingdoms of Nyumbani.

Imaro had told none of this to his Ngwika family. They too had a role to play in the conflict: to end the ***mfecane,*** the crushing, that is, the chaos caused by Bohu in the Highlands. Imaro was convinced that it was best that his father's people knew nothing of the role played by the Cloud Striders before his birth. The campaign against the Tsubi and the Mtatwa was already going to be difficult enough without him adding to the confusion by revealing to them that he was the son of two fathers, rather than none.

Imaro realized that he forgot a bit about the weight that weighed on his shoulders when he danced. He didn't need to think. Only the movement counted, just like when he fought, hunted, or ran alone and free in the wilderness.

But even so, he couldn't forget Kilewo. Couldn't manage to forget Tanisha...

Nomvula approached Imaro. The lack of expression in the warrior's gaze was beginning to irritate him. ***He'll notice me,*** she promised herself as she began the ***ngkunkwo,*** the most sensual of all ngwika dances. The other young women almost tripped, shocked by his audacity. It wasn't just the men who trained their muscles to move during the dances. The women learned certain movements that were unique to them, most of them secret. Imaro was going to find them.

Nomvula leaned back so much that it seemed impossible for her to stay on her feet. If she did not rock, the sides of her ***isikaka*** fell on her hips, revealing her legs up to height

thighs. The ripples of her muscles spread to her flat stomach, then her breasts began to quiver as she held the rest of her body completely rigid.

She straightened up suddenly. Just as she looked like she was going to tip over and fall face down, she caught herself and slowly and gracefully slid down to her knees in front of Imaro.

The drum rolls hadn't stopped. The other dancers were still twirling. But Nomvula was the center of attention, kneeling like this, her eyes glued to the ground. Imaro remained unmoved. Nomvula's performance had excited him. But this excitement had given rise to a mocking vision. He couldn't see Nomvula. He saw Tanisha, decapitated and her body hacked to pieces by Bohu. Then, before his eyes, a head had popped out from between Tanisha's bleeding shoulders. And a face was looking at him now... a face twisted with terror. Nomvula's face...

Fortunately, the vision faded. Imaro reached out and rested his hand on Nomvula's bare shoulder. He only touched it, but Nomvula felt he was shaking.

He's mine now, she thought with joy.

Imaro suddenly withdrew his hand. Nomvula raised her bright, ocher-made up eyes to him. Imaro watched him for a long moment. Then regret clouded the warrior's gaze and his eyes became like two black stones. He returned to the carpet.

Nkwana and Solosha exchanged worried looks as Imaro took his place between them. Without saying a word, the warrior grabbed a jug ***of utywala*** and took a long sip, as if the burning taste of beer could drive away the demons of the past that tormented his soul.

"You have a lot to learn about ***umetsho,*** Imaro,
murmured Solosha.

Nkwana says nothing. But he frowns because, as a ***nkosi,*** it was his duty to apologize to Nomvula's parents for Imaro's insulting conduct. And he didn't really know what he was going to tell them.

Nomvula sat up and shuffled forward. A young man from another clan sat across from her as young women whispered words of comfort to him as the dance continued.

"He doesn't understand ***umetsho,*** " said one.

“He doesn't know the meaning of ***ngkunkwo,”*** another said.

"Forget him, Nomvula," said a third. He will be gone soon.

But Nomvula did not listen to them. The instant Imaro turned away from her, humiliation stabbed through her. Refuse the ***ngkunkwo's implied offer.*** At that precise moment, she had hated Imaro. But this emotion had only lasted for a flash.

She had read in his eyes in that fleeting moment when their eyes had met. She had seen the suffering that shimmered there. She was convinced that he had tried to reach her, to tell her something, while fleeing from this contact. A voice deep inside her whispered that she was the only one who could ease the pain in the warrior's soul.

It was then, while her body continued to follow the movements of the dance and her mind was elsewhere, that Nomvula resolved to enlist the services of an ***umuti,*** a witch.

In a cellar darker than the bowels of the earth, she waited...

She knew that Nomvula would come to find her soon. She knew what Nomvula was going to ask for. She knew she would grant the wish. She knew what would happen once that wish was fulfilled.

The animal bones she had thrown on the ground outside her cave had screamed their message to her. The wisps of enchantment that floated in the air like ghosts had brought clear indications in their spirals. The rocky floor of the cave had trembled under the reverberations of powerful mystical forces.

Heedless of the darkness that surrounded her, she continued her preparations She knew that Nomvula would soon come to her…

2.
THE GREAT ELEPHANT

Many marches east of the Ngwika country the Bwaka were besieged by the Mtatwa. Nestled in a region of hills strewn with rocks and with many natural defenses, the country of the Bwaka had suffered a mass invasion of the Mtatwa. Slowly, but inexorably, the ***impis*** mtatwa – regiments identified by the patterns painted on their shields – had made their way through the steep-sided defile which alone provided access to the main Bwaka ***kraal .***

The Bwaka resisted with fierce determination. A peaceful people whose hillside crops and herds of goats in no way seemed to justify an invasion, their country had the misfortune to find itself across the implacable advance of Shingane, who had therefore condemned the Bwaka to be erased from the map.

When the bwaka herders saw the first ***impis,*** they understood that the ***mfecane*** had finally reached them, with all the inevitability of a bush fire in the dry season. Some elders had suggested fleeing.
Others to resist the invader.

"Where would we go?" some asked. The ***mfecane*** has turned the Highlands into wasps' nests. Wherever we went, they would chase us.

"If we run away, we'll have a chance of escaping," replied the others. If we stay, we will die.

After long words, Nyamana, the ***lion*** of the Bwaka, made his decision.

"This country is where our ancestors rest," he said solemnly.
We too will rest here if it is the will of our ancestors and our gods. But before that, we will make sure that the Mtatwa will perish in these hills, far from their own country and their ancestors.

The elders agreed with their ***nkosi.*** With pale eyes but with a will of steel, the Bwaka prepared their defenses. big ones

rocks were placed on the lip of the precipice overlooking the defile. Spears, axes and puzzles were put in the hands of men, women and children. Anyone who could hold a weapon had become a warrior.

They drew up battle plans. Goats were sacrificed to ancestors and gods. An oath was made to send as many Mtatwa as possible to their death before succumbing in turn. Courage was stored up like crops in anticipation of a drought.

But nothing the Bwaka had planned could have prepared them for the sight of Shingane's army marching on them through the hills.
The ***impis*** blackened the ground like an invasion of fire ants. Thousands of voices rumbled the war cries of the Mtatwa: " ***Bayete !*** Kill!
Sigidi ! One of us is worth a thousand! »

"Let them shout," Nyamana had said. Can noise hurt us?

None of the Bwaka made any remark about the futility of the bravado of their ***nkosi,*** under penalty of undermining their own morale.

As the ***impis*** entered the defile, the Bwaka dislodged the rocks, creating small avalanches that reduced dozens of Mtatwa to a pulp. The advance of the warriors does not weaken for all that. The Bwaka rained down torrents of spears on the Mtatwa when they scaled the rocks. Many of them found their target even when the Mtatwa brandished their gigantic oval shields. Those who had been hit collapsed. The others continued on.

Shingane yelled an order, to which his warriors immediately responded. As one man, they raised their shields above their heads, forming an impenetrable barrier. Like a centipede, the ***ungods*** advanced toward the mouth of the defile, rocks and spears deflected by their carapace of shields.

Nyamana understood that the meager hopes of his people had just been dashed. When other tribes had tried to attack them in the past, they had died in the defile, losing their energy and their lives until they became vulnerable to the inevitable counterattack launched by the defenders. The tactic had worked so often that the Bwaka had come to believe it was infallible.

But what they faced now was more than just one more tribal war. It was ***mfecane,*** destruction. Shingane was a new kind of ***nkosi,*** and the methods of warfare had changed. As Nyamana watched the mtatwa horde approach the ***kraal,*** he realized that his people's last day had come. And he knew what he had to do.

Letting out a cry that drowned out the din of the mtatwa army, Nyamana leapt from his vantage point and threw himself on the invaders.

His shield was not as large as that of the Mtatwa. But its pointed ends made it as much a weapon of attack as of defense. His other weapons included a throwing spear, another for melee, and a cudgel. A fox tail belt served as a loincloth. Her chest was covered with necklaces trimmed with multicolored beads. A goat's bladder, symbolizing his ***nkosi status,*** was placed on his head, on a leather cap from which a number of multicolored feathers protruded.

The ***umuti*** of his tribe claimed that the bladder would make him invincible. Nyamana didn't believe it any more than he had believed the sorcerers when they claimed that they would strike down the Mtatwa with deadly diseases. But Nyamana believed in his own courage and prowess.
He was a mighty man and he had never been defeated in single combat. As soon as he approached the Mtatwa, the ***nkosi*** bwaka shouted a challenge.

"Let that coward Shingane approach, instead of hiding behind the shields of his warriors!" Let him come face me in a duel, if he is not afraid!

A roar rose from the ranks of the Mtatwa, which silenced Nyamana as if he had hit a physical barrier. He hadn't been silent because he was afraid, but out of hope… A hope echoed by this cry of response and which was now spreading through the bwaka ranks. Because among the Abamba, Mtatwa and Bwaka, a battle between two tribes could be settled by a single combat between the two ***nkosi.*** Tradition had it that the losing ***nkosi*** 's army gave up the battle.

During the ***mfecane,*** several ***nkosi*** challenged Shingane. None had survived. But Nyamana was a brave man, gifted as a seasoned fighter. While their ***nkosi*** stood in defiance before the ***impis*** mtatwa, the Bwaka dreamed that the conquest could be stopped, that they would be the ones to put an end to the ***mfecane.***

But that dream faded when Shingane's thunderous laughter overwhelmed the mocking cries of his warriors. And he died completely when Shingane came out from between the ranks of the front line of the Mtatwa, standing straight before Nyamana and the Bwaka.

Rumors about Shingane's height and build had spread across the Highlands. He was nicknamed the “Great Elephant” and was said to be bigger than two warriors put together. Now that Nyamana was watching him approach, he knew the rumors were true. And the walls of the cliff seemed to close in on the ***nkosi*** of the Bwaka.

Because Shingane was literally a mountain of flesh. Greasy folds protruded from openings in his ornate breastplate. The large ostrich feathers and leopard skins that made up his headdress made him look even taller. A necklace made of cattle tails hung over his massive torso. Others had passed around his thick calves. His titanic waist was surrounded by a green leather cord, from which hung the tails of dozens of lions and leopards, forming a kilt called a ***mshipi.*** Legend has it that Shingane himself killed each of the beasts whose tails hung from the rope.

The ***nkosi*** 's shield was so large that other men had difficulty lifting it. His puzzle was the size of a rhino's thigh.

Despising throwing weapons, he was simply armed with a barbed-tipped dueling spear. The weapon had a name: Ixwa, "I eat."

But it was Shingane's face that made Nyamana lose his temper more than anything else. The Great Elephant's face was a round ebony moon, devoid of any emotion except an expression of sadistic amusement. Shingane's eyes reflected the fires of madness that had long since consumed his soul...

Nyamana had the greatest difficulty in the world to overcome the fear that threatened to overwhelm him while Shingane advanced on him with slow and measured steps. This slowness gave hope to the ***nkosi*** bwaka, for he moved at the speed of the hill antelope hunted by his people.

I can play him, thought Nyamana.

Shingane's laugh echoed on the walls of the cliff and became more and more acute before filling the hearts of the Bwaka who were witnessing the sinister spectacle with terror. Some began to scan the hills,

search for a way out through which they could escape the carnage that was looming. They found none.

"I accept your challenge, Nyamana of Bwaka," shouted Shingane in a voice as growling as that of a buffalo. Throw your spear! I'm a hard target to miss, even for people like you!

Nyamana brandishes his spear. Then, almost too quickly for the eye to follow, his arm slackened like a cracking whip. And the spear hissed at Shingane's grimacing face. The ***nkosi*** waited until the very last moment. Then, raising his shield as if it were as light as a feather, he deflected Nyamana's spear. The weapon hit a wall of the cliff and the shaft broke on it.

"Well aimed, Nyamana of Bwaka," said Shingane, raising his spear in turn. Now it's time for Ixwa to eat.

Shingane rushed abruptly at Nyamana. The slowness with which he had moved so far was a ruse. Like the elephant that earned him his nickname, Shingane's mass was deceptive and concealed his speed. He was on Nyamana almost before the ***nkosi*** bwaka had time to raise his shield to defend himself.

Nyamana struck desperately with his other spear, but Shingane easily dodged. Shingane hooked his shield on his opponent's. Despite Nyamana's fierce resistance, Shingane fired hard and sent the Bwaka's shield flying aside, throwing it off balance.

Shingane rammed Ixwa into his opponent's ribcage. The cracking of bones was drowned out by Nyamana's howl of fear and pain. And as the Bwaka sank slowly to the ground, Shingane accompanied the movement, making no effort to extricate Ixwa from the body of his victim.

It was only when Nyamana found himself sprawled on the ground that Shingane finally demonstrated the terrifying strength for which he was both renowned and feared. Ixwa's serrations had caught on Nyamana's ribs. Planting a foot on the ***nkosi's chest,*** Shingane tore the blade away with a single contraction of the powerful muscles hidden beneath its folds of fat. Nyamana's cry of agony choked out in a gurgle of blood as his ribs were torn apart and his artery-severed heart gushed scarlet geysers.

Blood sprayed the lower part of Shingane's shield and soaked the tails that dangled from his ***mshipi.*** Raising his blood-dripping spear high above his head, the ***nkosi*** cried:

— Ixwa ate! Now let's eat the Bwaka!

Shingane at their head, the ***impis*** launched an assault on the Bwaka ***kraal .*** Hundreds of warriors trampled on Nyamana's corpse until all that was left was a pulp of reddish flesh.

The Mtatwa met only futile resistance. There was no need to resort to the shield wall again. Before sunset, the Bwaka ***kraal*** had been reduced to a heap of charred ruins and heaps of corpses. Cattle and crops were looted and used to feed Shingane's mighty army.

The ***mfecane*** had eaten the Bwaka. Shingane's carnal appetite for slaughter and conquest remained intact. And Bohu's plan to sow confusion in the Highlands in order to block the forces of the Monomatapa Empire continued.

Far from the place that had served as the scene of the last Shingane massacre, an armada was sailing south on the Bahari Mashiriki, the eastern ocean. The banners of five kingdoms danced in the spray-scented breeze. The most important represented the solar disk, emblem of the Cush, the empire of the kandisa. Because the queen had forged an unprecedented alliance with the other kingdoms of the north and east of Nyumbani, in order to give battle to the Naama.

Punt and Engaruku, neighbors of Cush, had joined this coalition.
The Axum had been a relentless adversary of the Cush for a number of rains from time immemorial. The kandisa had been forced to use her sorcery to persuade the negus of Axum to sail with the armada.
For the first time in a thousand rains, the moon-stricken banner of Axum floated alongside the sun of Cush.

Finally, the Sha'a of Azania had also thrown his country's forces into battle against the Naama. The old monarch realized that a victory of the Erriten, the wizards who ruled Naama, would have far more consequences than a simple military defeat. The kandisa had shown him that the Erriten not only intended to take over the east coast, but also to free the Mashataan, the Demon Gods, from their dimensional exile. Freeing the Mashataan would mean

the annihilation of all the peoples of Nyumbani except the Naama…

As the armada advanced inexorably south toward Kitwana, the southernmost of the east coast kingdoms, and the first to fall into the hands of the Naama, the kandisa and the negus were in discussion on the bridge of the ***Khaiyah,*** the flagship of the Cushite fleet. She had already spoken with the sha'a and the other monarchs of the coalition: ***the omal*** of Punt and the ***mbuli*** of Engaruku.

The other rulers already knew what would be expected of them in the battle to retake the port of Mlongo, capital of Kitwana, from the Naama, but the negus required special treatment. The alliance of Axum with Cush was still a tenuous thing, because the bloody rivalry between the two countries was immemorial.

The monarchs sat in their ornate chairs near the kandisa cabin. Five members of the Hakut Ras, the Council of Nobility, accompanied the negus. All the Axumites were in battle dress: an iron-trimmed cuirass, decorated with tufts of lions' manes. The negus was an old man. His black, penetrating eyes stood out amidst his aquiline, bronze-colored features. Her eyes never left the kandisa as she talked about the strategy she intended to use in Mlongo.

The kandisa calmly met her counterpart's gaze. Like most Cushites, her irises were amber and shone like twin torches in her obsidian-black face. A plain white robe covered most of her body. The Cush's crown was delicately placed on his head. It was a kind of golden headdress in the shape of a falcon, its wings spread downwards reaching cheek level.

His face was neither young nor old. He was strikingly serene. The ***tawa,*** the power she had inherited from the Cloud Striders through her ancestors, vibrated within her in unison with her heartbeat.

Rakhma, the commander of the Cush armies, was standing beside him. He was armored from head to toe, and a gigantic sword was slipped into the scabbard hanging by his side. A mask worked in gold and depicting a lion concealed his features. Due to the mask, his voice echoed as he detailed the battle plan. When he had finished, the kandisa insis

more about strategy. His voice was soft, but it was enough to drown out the sound of the waves crashing into the ***Khaiyah's hull.***

"We'll have ***mchawi*** in front of us… the sorcery of the Erriten.

I don't know what form it will take. But I'm pretty sure my ***tawa*** will be enough to neutralize him. And once witchcraft is removed from the equation, the outcome of the battle will be determined by force of arms. Each of our fleets will have its role. The Axum will hold the river south of Mlongo, so as to prevent the Naama from fleeing there once the battle turns against them.

The Hakut Ras members whispered their disagreement. The Axumites were a proud and fierce people. For them, glory came through a direct confrontation with the Naama. They were extremely hurt to see themselves relegated to the back like this.

"It's an honorable role," Rakhma said, understanding the Axumites' response. It will be up to you to prevent the Erriten from returning to Naama before we take the war south.

The Axumite nobles continued to raise objections, until the negus silenced them with a brief, sharp gesture. The kandisa had only brought him to join the coalition by invading his country and seizing Gondur, its capital. She had also shown him and the Hakut Ras what the fate of Axum would be if the Naama were to prevail. To rely on kandisa was a humiliation; getting invaded by the Naama would lead to their annihilation. This was how she had ensured her forced participation in the coalition against the Naama. And coerced allies were not ones to be trusted...

"We will deploy our fleet as you suggest," said the negus.

He could feel the tension and frustration of his nobles in front of his acceptance. But they dared not contradict him.

The kandisa nodded.

"We'll have more to say to each other when we get to view of Mlongo, she said.

As the negus gathered his men and prepared to return to his own flagship, he felt the kandisa's amber gaze lingering on him.

Does she know? Does she know that the Erriten spoke to me after she left my palace a few weeks ago? Does she know what they asked me to do?

In the heart of the Abamba Highlands, in territory claimed by the Tsubi tribe, an emaciated young girl sat listlessly by a pool that carved out the top of a hill. It was Nongkwaze, the prophetess whose visions in the waters of the Wankuza basin had led the Tsubi to engage in cattle slaughter.

His visions had taught him that once the cattle and grain of the people of the Highlands were gone, the gods would descend from the heavens to give them cattle that never died and grain that would grow forever, and that those who ate the flesh of the cattle and bread made from cereals would in turn become gods.

The Tsubi had believed Nongkwaze's prophecies, for she was imbued ***with unkansi –*** the power of trance. But Nongkwaze had never told her people about her other visions… The visions of the faceless man who spoke to her in her mind and told her what to say to the Tsubi. She had never told them, because the faceless man had forbidden it. Even still, she shivered at the memory of the fate he had given her a glimpse of, if ever she were to reveal his existence...

Beneath her lay the barren, charred territory of her people. Cattle bones lay scattered across the desolate landscape like so many ears of white corn. The surrounding areas were in a similar state of desolation. Whole tribes were starving, except for the Tsubi.
For even though the people of Nongkwaze had long since destroyed their own food supplies and refused to eat the livestock and crops of other tribes, the basin dweller's sorcery kept the Tsubi alive. In battle they were lean as ectoplasm…but they were invincible.

Nongkwaze's body had shrunk until it became a maze of bones flush against his black skin. His eyes were almost invisible in his sunken sockets. She hadn't had a vision for several weeks, as she climbed into the pool every day. And the sky remained closed. No god had yet descended to supply the devastated region.

- Where are you ? Nongkwaze croaked weakly as she scanned the flat surface of the pool. Why did you leave me? When will the gods arrive, with their gifts of cattle and grain?

She spoke plaintively, absolutely not like a prophetess of whom everyone drank the slightest word. Despite the colossal impact that

her views on life in the Highlands, she was just a child of nine rains.

She noticed a movement towards the center of the pelvis. His eyes widened in apprehension; never had the water been so turbulent.
His visions had always appeared to him when the water was clear and still. Suddenly, water gushed out in a geyser as tall as twice a man. The most absolute terror nailed Nongkwaze to the rock on which she sat. The swirling torrent assaults his ears like the crash of a gigantic waterfall.
Then the column began to shrink and grow to the size of a human being. The waters parted, sliding over the body of a massive, dark-skinned man, who raised his arms. The water hissed like a nest of vipers. The apparition was standing on the water.
Nongkwaze couldn't make out his features or any other details: the figure swallowed the sunset light.

But she knew who it was...

She had seen the opaque oval of his face countless times. It was the face of the one giving the visions. And now he revealed himself totally to her. But why ?

"Unhappy child, here I am," said the man, aloud and not in Nongkwaze's thoughts. Very soon now will come the end.

Nongkwaze was shaken by an uncontrollable tremor as Bohu approached her, her feet leaving no mark or imprint on the water. She couldn't even swallow enough air to breathe.

The capital of Naama consisted of two cities. La Cité Basse, fearfully crouched between the sea of the Confins lands and a raised plateau, like a table for giants. The High City, home of the Erriten, was built on this plateau.

The Lower City vibrated with worried murmurs. In the Upper City, silence reigned supreme. In their vast palace, fourteen Erriten sat on their gigantic granite thrones. Dresses with iridescent fabrics enveloped bodies far too large for human beings. Spheres of emerald fire hung above their heads, within reach of hands concealed in robes.

Six other thrones were empty. Five belonged to the Erriten who were in the subjugated kingdom of Kitwana. The sixth had once been occupied by Chikanda, whom Imaro had killed in battle.

A low table was placed in front of the thrones. Emerald smoke clouded its surface. Through it, the Erriten saw the events unfolding in the Abamba Highlands. Their faces reflected their satisfaction with what they discovered..

3.
ICANTO

The Wrinkled Hills were crevassed with deep, damp caverns. In these secret places lived the ***umuti*** – wizards or witches banished after being identified as such. It was rare for the Ngwika to use the services of an ***umuti.*** When this happened, the intention was rarely avowable: to get rid of a rival by casting a curse on him, or to secure an advantage in war or in the hunt.

Nomvula's motive was less selfish than most of those usually invoked by those who went to the caves. She really thought she was doing as much for Imaro as for herself.

She crouched uncomfortably in the cave of Bengeshe, an ***umuti*** who was said to be very skilled in the dark arts that were her people's specialty. Nomvula's mother had confessed to her that she played with Bengeshe when they were little; ***the umuti*** had another name at that time, before the hunt for witches forced her to cut all ties with her clan, her tribe and her ancestors.

In the shadows of his lair, Bengeshe's features were hard to discern. Nomvula fidgeted nervously on the rug ***the umuti*** had provided for her. It was his third visit to the cave. The first time, she had explained to Bengeshe that she had a love problem and therefore needed an ***icantu.*** Bengeshe had chased her away, saying she would think about it, asking her to come back three days later to get her answer. On the second visit, Bengeshe had told her that she was going to make ***the icantu.*** She had fed Nomvula a concoction that had made her nauseous uncontrollably. ***The umuti*** calmly gathered the vomit into a clay bowl.

"Come back in three days," she had said. ***The icantu*** will be ready.

Nomvula therefore waited while Bengeshe chanted a song whose words were untranslatable in Ngwika. The thoughts of the young

woman were dominated by ***the icantu,*** and by Imaro. But she was also thinking of the price that Bengeshe was sure to demand in return for his services, a price that ***the umuti*** had not yet let her know.

When she first entered the cavern, Nomvula was sure she would accept whatever price was asked of her. But when she'd found herself sitting in the fetid cave, her resolve hadn't been so adamant.

Nomvula was thinking that the song would never end and that she was going to run away, when suddenly Bengeshe fell silent. She strained to peer into the darkness, but the scraping of calloused feet on the stone was all that informed her that Bengeshe had risen and was approaching. The silhouette of ***the umuti*** finally stood out in front of her.

Two dark, gnarled hands reached out to Nomvula. In the hollow of these was a small clay jar closed by a wooden stopper.

The jar was plain, but its polished gray surface gleamed even in the dim light that filtered in from the cave entrance.

" ***The icantu*** is inside," Bengeshe said.

His voice was a low croak; she spent far more time silently communicating with the spirits than talking out loud.

Nomvula put a hesitant finger on the cork. Bengeshe gave him a violent blow on the hand to distract him.

"Don't touch that cork until the time is right!" she warned her. You must do exactly as I explained to you, otherwise the magic will fail.

Nomvula moved her hands away from the jar.

“You didn't tell me what the price would be for ***the icantu,*** ” she said, “but your price will be mine.

Bengeshe leaned forward until Nomvula was able to make out her clearly. ***The umuti*** was a tall, lean woman, muscular like a man. She wore men's clothes; an ***umuti*** would have been dressed as a woman. Her face still bore the scars from the beatings from the day she had been 'sniffed', identified as a witch, many rains ago.

"You owe me nothing, young lady," Bengeshe said, his voice barely above a whisper. I know why you want this ***icantu.*** I know who this Imaro is and why he is so important to you. There will be

quite a price to pay. But you won't do it to me. Now take it and go.

Nomvula took the jar, slipped it into a fold of his cloak, and backed out of the cave. She only turned around once outside and walked away, without a word of farewell or thanks to ***the umuti,*** who expected none.

The homes of the Nkwana family occupied a large portion of the ***kraal.*** Because of his rank as ***nkosi,*** his family and herd were substantial. When he died, the land and the herds would be divided among his children, and he was happy to know that he would not have to endure this nightmare.

Nkwana and Imaro were immersed in a long discussion in the courtyard of ***the itembiso*** that Nkwana shared with his eldest wife. The two men were seated on rugs and drank fermented milk from cups which they dipped in a large clay vessel.

After Imaro's reaction to Nomvula during the dance, ***the embizweni*** ended faster than expected. Even though his father's people remained outwardly friendly towards him, Imaro felt some diminishment of the sense of belonging he had felt upon arriving at the ***kraal.***

He continued to practice carefully to learn ***the umetsho*** and manners of the Highlands. He knew that he would have to know the hills, so different from the savannah in which he had been raised, if he wanted to have a chance of finding Bohu. He learned quickly.

During a hunt with Solosha and several young warriors, Imaro had proven that the poems celebrating his prowess hadn't exaggerated anything.
A gigantic hill lion had surprised the hunters, and a man had found death under the claws of the beast. Imaro had killed the animal with a throw of a spear. The weapon had pierced the feline from side to side, pinning it to the ground.

Other praises were sung after this exploit. The Ngwika respected Imaro far more than the Ilyassai had ever done. But there was this case with Nomvula…

"It's the only way to make amends, Imaro," Nkwana was saying.
I offered his father some of my head of cattle, but he refused.

Nkwana was frowning, which rarely happened to him and accentuated the wrinkles of his forehead and around his mouth.

"Let him die!" he resumed furiously. He's been mad at me since the days of our initiation, and now he shows me the baboon's foot!

Imaro blinked. He had learned enough ***umetsho*** to know that Nkwana had just uttered a terrible insult. For the Ngwika, the baboon was a feared and despised animal. The ***umuti*** were said to make baboons and hyenas their pets.

"I'm sorry," Imaro said. It was because...

"I understand, ***izizalwana,*** " Nkwana said, brushing aside Imaro's excuse with the wave of his hand. Death took away some of my wives. I understand how you feel. Nomvula's father is the problem, not you.
He always took every opportunity to make my life harder than it already is.

"So if I understand correctly, I just have to go to ***the itembeso*** in Nomvula and allow him to serve me food," Imaro said. Are you sure that will be enough to excuse my gesture?

'It may not be enough for Nomvula,' said Nkwana, 'but it will be more than enough for her father.

Imaro sighed in frustration.

"There are so many things I don't understand about your
people, he said. And I don't have time to learn.

Nkwana threw his head back and let out such a roar of laughter that Imaro could only smile in response.

"I have lived a long time, ***izizalwana,*** " said Nkwana. And even I sometimes don't understand my own people. Do not worry. Once the ***mfecane*** is behind us, you will have the rest of your life ahead of you to unravel the mysteries of ***umetsho.***

Imaro tilted his head. He didn't know what else to do to express his gratitude to Nkwana and the words he had just spoken. He was constantly amazed at the contrasts between the Ngwika and the Ilyassai, when the tribes were both made up of warriors and herders. He saw himself less and less as an Ilyassai. But he was not ready to consider himself an ngwika.

The two men turned to the footsteps that had just sounded. They saw Solosha coming into the yard. After having greeted them, the latter spoke.

“Time for us to go, Imaro. You wouldn't want to keep Nomvula waiting...

Imaro stood up. He was a head taller than Solosha, who was only small compared to the other Abambas. His father was the ***nkosi,*** but Solosha was the one who knew the pulse of the ***kraal best.*** It was he who had organized ***the embizweni,*** overseeing everything from food and drink to the order in which the dances were performed. And it was he who had taken care of Imaro's education in ***umetsho.*** Imaro quickly learned that among the Ngwika, those who needed to settle a dispute went to see Nkwana. Those who wanted to know what was going on in the ***kraal*** went to Solosha.

In some ways, Solosha reminded him of Pomphis, the Bambuti who was his first and best friend. Imaro had left Bambuti in Maguvurunde. Both had decided that the task of finding and killing Bohu fell to Imaro alone.

As they approached ***Nomvula*** 's family itemmbiso, Imaro took a closer look at his ***izizalwana .*** Solosha had his father's broad, smiling face, but he also looked like Mkwayo, Imaro's father.
Imaro was also certain resemblances with Solosha. Imaro was gradually getting used to living with people whose traits resembled his own, traits that had always caused him to be ostracized among the Ilyassai.

The sun was about to set. Many Ngwika were seated in the courtyard adjoining their ***itembiso.*** Most were having dinner. People hailed Solosha and Imaro as they passed them, and Solosha enthusiastically returned their salutes. Imaro was more distant.

They quickly arrived in front of Nomvula's house. She was standing in the yard, alone, under an aloe. The other members of his family, including his father, were obviously absent. Solosha was offended, and he knew he would remember. He greeted Nomvula, and took his leave.

"Remember, it's ***ma-conini*** to drink milk from their cattle,
he whispered in Imaro's ear before leaving. Good luck.

"I see you, Imaro," Nomvula said, as we formally greeted
a visitor to the Highland tribes.

“I see you, Nomvula,” he replied.

She took his hand, and led him inside ***the itembiso.***

After finishing the meal Nomvula had prepared for him, Imaro leaned back on his mat, his belly full of boiled millet and roast goat. The Ngwika took great care to offer him only meat from

goat since he had explained that it was ***ma-conini*** for him to eat beef.

Some of the mores of his mother's people were more deeply ingrained in him than others. The Ngwika valued their cattle, but had no qualms about eating their animals. For the Ilyassai, on the other hand, the heads of cattle were as much a part of the tribe as human beings. They only consumed the milk and blood of their animals. The Ngwika respected ilyassai customs, as it was the people to whom the eldest wife of their greatest ***nkosi,*** Mkwayo, belonged.

Nomvula hadn't said much during the meal. She had put on her best clothes. A light orange ***ingubo*** was draped over his shoulders and slung across his chest. A leather ***isikaka*** hugged her thighs.
Multi-colored pearl necklaces were around her neck, arms and ankles. His eyes were underlined by a transverse ocher bar. An orange turban covered his hair.

She had not eaten, because the Ngwika women did not take their meals with the men. And she was careful not to draw Imaro's attention to the small clay jug that stood next to her rug.

"You cook well," Imaro said, after swallowing the last ***utywala*** Nomvula had offered him.

Nomvula replied with a shy smile. Then she grabs the little jar and handed it to Imaro.

"It's for you," she said.

- What is it about ?

- A gift.

Imaro stared at her. The young woman's answer was vague enough to arouse her suspicions. He looked at the yellow metal rings that circled his wrists. At Cush, the kandisa had materialized the rings from the golden sphere which was the source of her ***tawa.*** Through a sensation he would have struggled to describe in words, the rings told him when Bohu or ***mchawi*** were near.

He felt only a very slight tingle, under his skin and in his soul, which told him that Bohu was somewhere in the Highlands. Nothing else. He took the jar.

"Should I open it now, or later?" he asked.

“Now… please. Its important to me.

Imaro recalled the tension between Nkwana and Nomvula's father. Seizing the cork between thumb and forefinger, he opened the jar.

Something quick and almost invisible shot out of it and stuck to Imaro's forearm. He stepped back. His mouth opened to form words of anger and betrayal, but he had lost control of his movements.

Eyes wide, he stared at the folded thing. It looked like a snake, but its scales were almost transparent.

Imaro could see his skin, like a dark patch behind the translucent substance. His head was disproportionate to his body. Ophidian eyes were fixed on Imaro as his ivory-white fangs sank into his flesh, distilling a festering substance through his veins.

Nomvula watched fearfully as ***the icantu*** did its job. Imaro's eyes widened even more, but Nomvula couldn't see the visions that swayed before the warrior's eyes, obscuring her from view.

He saw Tanisha as she was the last time he had seen her alive… She was naked, her body stretched towards his, her face shining with passion.. Then he saw her dead, her head missing, her body cut to pieces, lying beside the mutilated corpse of their son...

He saw Keteke, his first love, stolen from another tribe when he lived among the Ilyassai... He saw Keteke as she lay in death, a face petrified with horror on a skeleton with bloody bones.

The corpses of the two women slowly approached… They stretched out their arms towards him… They called to him…

The icantu detached from Imaro's arm. He spun like an arrow in the direction of the two apparitions. At the same time, it grows disproportionately until it exceeds a python in size. He wrapped himself around the two bodies, pressing Keteke's bones against Tanisha's mutilated flesh, and tightened his rings. The two corpses became less and less distinct under his translucent skin. Then they disappeared completely.

Having defeated the apparitions, ***the icantu*** released its rings. Through the slit of his eyes, he stared at Imaro. Then he seemed to float to the jar, which remained where he had dropped it. ***The icantu*** lost in size and reentered the jar. The instant ***the icantu's*** tail disappeared, Imaro's stillness ended. He tipped forward, but barely managed to catch himself, avoiding the

fall. Then he raised his head and looked at Nomvula.

She had got rid of her clothes and her ornaments. Eyes lowered, she knelt… and waited.

At the sound of bare feet rubbing on the floor of ***the itembeso,*** Nomvula looked up. Imaro approached her. His hands went to the leather belt that held his loincloth. He tugged and the rope gave in his hand as if it were fabric.

She watched the warrior, fearful of finding the glint of madness she had seen earlier. But his eyes only sparkled because he was looking at her. She opened her arms. Smiled when he hugged her. Welcomed the feel of the mat against her back as he laid her down.

Darkness drowned ***the itmbiso*** like dark water. Two black shapes were entwined on Nomvula's mat. She was cuddled up against Imaro's body. A little earlier, he had literally failed to crush her during their love affair. Satisfied, they conversed in low voices. Nomvula had spoken of his visit to ***the umuti,*** and also of the function of ***the icantu.***

Imaro hadn't held it against him for having deceived him like that. He knew there had been witchcraft from the moment he opened the jar. The rings on his wrist had told him it wasn't ***mchawi.***

Finally, he was happy that his burden of guilt was lighter, if not gone.

He told Nomvula about the visions of Tanisha and Keteke that ***the icantu*** had elicited, and what the serpent had done to the apparitions. Nomvula suppressed a shiver upon hearing that. Because when the warrior had removed the cork, she had seen ***the icantu curl*** up on her arm, then it had disappeared. She knew nothing of the battle between the serpent and the specters sprung from Imaro's past.

The warrior's heartbeat sounded like thunderclaps in Nomvula's ears as she laid her head on his powerful chest. Far too quickly, he should leave her. Way too quickly...

"Aren't you afraid?" Imaro suddenly asked.

- Enough to ?

“Of what happens to those who fall in love with me.

Nomvula looked up. The thought had never occurred to him. She feared neither Imaro nor suffering the fate of Tanisha and Keteke. His only fear was losing Imaro too soon.

The warrior's muscles tensed, as Nomvula let his silence take too long. Sensing Imaro's apprehension, she spoke.

“If you're not scared, then neither am I,” she said.

She leaned over and kissed him. Imaro's large hands reached down the hips of the young woman, marrying their contours wonderfully.

"You know I can't stay long," he said. I'll have to resume my hunt. When Bohu and the Naama have been defeated, then no more danger will threaten you.

"Will you come back to Galeka?"

“Nkwana says I'll always be welcome here,” Imaro said. But my father appointed me as heir to the empire.

Nomvula sat up and disengaged from his embrace.

— And an empire in Maguvurunde is worth more than just a ***kraal*** in the Highlands, she said, more with resignation than bitterness.

With a short burst of laughter, Imaro grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to him.

"What makes you think the heir wants the empire?" he said.

Nomvula's mouth dropped open in surprise, just long enough for Imaro to press his lips to hers and pull her onto the mat. He'd answered her question with another question...but she didn't mind at the time.

Imaro left ***the itembiso*** at dawn. ***The umetsho*** wanted Nomvula to stay indoors until her lover was out of sight of the family dwellings. Neither he nor she wanted to notice the small clay jar next to the damp mat of perspiration. When Nomvula looked inside, it was empty. Following Bengeshe's instructions, she broke the container and then buried the fragments and the cork under her mat.

Solosha was waiting for Imaro on the path that led to ***Nkwana*** 's family's itembeso. His usual exuberance was absent, but he smiled when he saw Imaro.

"How was your night, ***izizalwana?"*** Solosha asked.

"Nomvula's father has no more reason to complain to yours, replied Imaro. But that's not what troubles you, is it?

"No," Solosha agreed. Something happened… But I didn't want to bother you last night.

- Explain.

"A runner arrived from the Ntinde ***kraal*** in the pre-dawn hours," Solosha said. He said that the Tsubi, the cattle killers,

were getting closer to here. My father is gathering all the warriors this morning.

Imaro hid his reaction, but the news filled him with joy. He knew that the Tsubi would lead him to Bohu. The wait was over. The fight would begin soon. Soon he would be confronted with the killer of his wife and son...

Imaro and Solosha saw that the people of the ***kraal*** were already preparing for war. Men were sharpening the points of their spears, mending shields, checking the balance of swords. Imaro and Solosha discussed tactics and strategy as they approached ***the itembiso.***

Solosha's eyes were sharp. He soon spotted the two small bite marks on Imaro's forearm. He understood their meaning on the spot. An ***icantu.*** He frowned and resolved to speak with Nomvula before the warriors set out for Ntinde.

Shingane wandered between the six rows of people who had been buried up to their necks in the soft earth of the sorghum field. There were twenty heads in each row. As Shingane walked across this macabre field, the expressions on the faces at his feet ranged from terror to apathy. Most were men, but there were also women, and even a few children. They knew they should expect no mercy from the Great Elephant.

Behind each of the heads was a warrior armed with an ax held high. At Shingane's command, the warriors would cut down their axes.

The buried had been sniffed out as wizards and witches by the isangoma, ***the soothsayers, of Shingane. For the executioners, they deserved the fate that awaited them.***

Shingane spoke a single word.

— Bayet.

One hundred and twenty axes fell at once. Iron blades sank deep into the skulls, cutting short a crescendo of cries of agony. Blood and brains came to sow the sorghum field.

And Shingan burst out laughing…

4.

THE **TEMPLE WAR**

Mji-Amanyani was the capital of the Maguvurunde kingdom and empire, a vast territory that stretched from the Mahali-ya-Kiu desert in the west to the ***bure,*** a region of arid hills, in the east. Between these two desolate immensities was a rich and fertile country which had given birth to many kingdoms which, until recent times, waged perpetual wars.

Ten rains earlier, Mkwayo of the Ngwika Abamba tribe had become Amanyani's monomatapa and united the different kingdoms into a single empire. Now Maguvurunde was preparing for a war of a different kind.

Mji-Amanyani was on a vast basin, surrounded by gently sloping hills crowned by majestic trees. The city itself was not a uniform structure, but composed of many granite-walled buildings scattered throughout the city, of varying size, the largest of which served as the emperor's home. From a distance, the city looked as if it blended into the landscape just as much as the surrounding hills. Paved roads led to Mji-Amanyani, but in the town the only paths were those that had been trodden by countless generations of feet and hooves.

As people went about their daily business, soldiers in breastplates marched and galloped between the buildings. There were so many of them that they looked like an occupying army. Many were from Amanyani, but some came from other Maguvurunde kingdoms.

The army was preparing to descend south, through the Highlands, towards the Naama, in the region of the Outer Lands. Not so long ago, such an action would have been unthinkable. The enmity between the Maguvurunde and the Highlands was then too intense, and the expedition

army would have had to fight its way through countless tribes before reaching its goal. The success of the plan depended on Mkwayo's brother's expedition. If he managed to put an end to the ***mfecane,*** the invasion remained possible, otherwise it would be much more difficult.

The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** - the soldiers mounted on the mbizi, equines which combined the qualities of the horse and the stripes of the zebra - passed at a leisurely trot in front of the conical stone towers surmounted by sculptures representing the Shiri-ya-Mheni, the Thunderbird, symbol of the empire. Women whose clothes showed swathes of brown flesh brought skins inside enclosures whose palisades were three times the size of a man. The walls were made of rows of small granite bricks stacked without mortar.

Preparations for war were taking on an unprecedented scale. The ***ndaus*** – the nobles – and the common people converged on the palace, ***the imba,*** to learn what the monomatapa expected of them. Some accepted their mission without flinching. Others balked.

An open and spacious courtyard formed the heart of the palace compound. It was there that the monomatapa received complaints. In the center of the courtyard was a large clay platform with multicolored patterns. There were several stools. Slender wooden poles on which were carved animal shapes supported a conical roof protecting the stools from the sun.

That day, the monomatapa had left the platform aside, preferring to sit on a carpet, like the others. Mkwayo was quite big, almost as big as Imaro. And his muscles of steel were also almost equal to those of his son, despite the forty-seven rains that had descended on the course of his tumultuous life.

Mkwayo wore all the insignia of his rank: a white coat like a cloud which left one of his broad shoulders bare, rings of gold thread passed around his wrists and ankles, and a gold headband which girded his head. . On the back of her crown, delicate chains, also in gold, hung like tufts of a lion's mane. On the upper part were stuck white ostrich feathers. He wore the red beaded necklace of the ***ubu-hlalu.*** Despite his incredible power as Emperor of Maguvurunde, Mkwayo had never forgotten that he was a Ngwika…

Captured by Amanyani slavers while still a young ***nkosi,*** Mkwayo had risen from ***muruwi,*** fighting in the gladiator arenas, to monomatapa of Amanyani, and then to emperor of Maguvurunde. At his side sat Katisa, the dakamatapa, that is to say the empress.
She had left behind the beaded ceremonial dresses and her crown, and was dressed in a simple ***njobo,*** a short dress favored by the women of Maguvurunde. She did not, however, belong to the Maguvurunde. She was an Ilyassai, from the plains of Tamburure, far to the north. In Maguvurunde, where skin colors ranged from sienna to ebony, Katisa mahogany attested to its foreign origin.

Katisa has been at the center of most recent events. It had been coveted many moons ago by Chitendu, a sorcerer shaman of the Ilyassai tribe, who was actually an instrument of the Erriten.
She fled south and ended up in Amanyani, where she was enslaved. During her captivity, she had fallen in love with Mkwayo, then ***muruwi.***

When they learned that Katisa was expecting a child, they escaped, but found themselves separated. Mkwayo's path had taken him to the Ngwika, Katisa's to Mahali-ya-Kiu, an arid country avoided by the inhabitants of Maguvurunde.

In the desert, she had lived alongside a band of short, yellow-skinned hunters called the Twa-si. The Twa-si were the ones who introduced her to the Cloud Strider, who touched her and her unborn child.

After Imaro was born, she returned to her Ilyassai village.
After following the instructions of the Cloud Strider who told her there was no alternative, she abandoned her son and returned to Maguvurunde, in search of her lost love, Mkwayo. And she had found him on the throne.

Mkwayo had made Katisa his queen and the first of his wives. They had waited together for their son's return. When that day came it was difficult, both for them and for him, but eventually they came to some kind of agreement, and a reconciliation.

Katisa was around Mkwayo's age, but contact with the Cloud Strider had lessened the effects of the number of rains on her body. She was often taken not for the wife, but for the daughter of

Mkwayo. She knew that one day the rains would come and take Mkwayo away from her. They never discussed it, but they knew it would happen…

Pomphis was there. He was a Bambuti, a pygmy from Ituri Kubwa, the humid forest that dominates the western part of the Nyumbani continent.
Still a child, slave traders had stolen him from his parents and he had been bought by the sha'a of Azania. His life had changed when the sha'a sold him to a Cush scholar. By studying, Pomphis had become a scholar in his turn, doubled as a linguist, and he had won his freedom in the kingdom of the North. The kandisa knew how to recognize his talents. She had sent him to find a certain warrior, "more powerful than all the others."
She didn't know who or where. Pomphis had survived his mission…and found Imaro. After saving each other's lives, the two men sealed a true and deep friendship. Imaro had accepted Pomphis' invitation to travel with him to the Cush. It was there that he had met the kandisa. But she had been unable to provide him with the answers he expected about his family heritage and his destiny. On the other hand, he had found a certain serenity and peace by establishing himself as a blacksmith. Then Bohu had shattered his illusion of serenity by killing his wife and son.

Pomphis had been saddened to see Imaro leaving Maguvurunde for the Abamba Highlands in pursuit of Bohu. For the Bambuti, the Ilyassai was an endless enigma that he hoped to be able to decipher one day. But he knew that Imaro's destiny lay in the south, and that the warrior needed to pursue it, without him. For the time being, the Bambuti remained in Amanyani, where he acted as the kandisa's emissary to the monomatapa. He would go somewhere else soon enough.

Finally, there was Rabir and Majnun. The weeks Rabir had spent crossing Kitwana and Maguvurunde had been the longest of his life for this ocean-going sailor. Majnun was an exiled king. Following the lightning invasion of Kitwana, he had found himself forced to flee Mlongo, his capital, to find refuge in the ***bure,*** this inhospitable region which separates the kingdoms of the east coast from those of Maguvurunde. The monomatapa considered Majnun a monarch in his own right and he had promised his help in retaking Kitwana.

Majnun was thin but stood tall. His clothing was similar to that of the monomatapa, although he continued to prefer the turban to the feathered headdress. His face was restless and resolute when he spoke. He had become a

king during his stay in Mji-Amanyani, although his kingdom was still in the hands of invaders.

It was Msipo, a ***mtekwa,*** commander, who had come across Majnun and the other refugees in Mapungubwe, the southernmost of the Maguvurunde kingdoms. He had led them in front of the monomatapa, recognizing their importance. Clad in leather armor and a feathered helmet, he was a middle-aged man, whose stomach was beginning to weigh uncomfortably on his breastplate. He was, however, a fine strategist.

"I can't thank you enough for all the help you're going to give me in driving the Naama out of my country, Mkwayo," Majnun said. It's like a gift from Wamlumya himself…

"Don't compare me with your sky god," the monomatapa said, laughing. I am flattered enough as it is by my ***ndaus.***

"It's a good strategy," Msipo said. With the forces of the kandisa attacking from the sea and ours from the land, the Naama will yield under our combined assault like a nut between two stones.

Their ***mchawi*** will not match our power.

"You don't know what ***mchawi is,*** " said Pomphis calmly. And you don't don't know the Erriten.

"Your kandisa should be able to take care of the ***mchawi,*** " Msipo replied. She gave a pretty convincing demonstration of her powers not too long ago.

Pomphis did not answer. Her diminutive size and chubby face belied the wisdom in her eyes. He couldn't understand why Msipo had become so touchy with him. They got along well, before, until they arrived in Amanyani.

— Save your anger for the battlefield, Msipo, said the monomatapa, more curtly than he would have liked.

The ***mtekwa*** lowered his head to accept the rebuff. Pomphis pretended not to see the quick glance Msipo gave him when he looked up again.

Cut the desire hand on Mkwayo's arm.

"It's hard for all of us to wait," she said. We have been preparing to march south for a long time. But we have to wait for Nkwana to end the ***mfecane.***

“He will,” the monomatapa said confidently. Remember, our son is with him.

Silence fell at the mention of Imaro. The warrior had touched the lives of everyone present. Everyone knew his bitterness. Everyone knew what he had been through, from the day Katisa had abandoned him to the day he had discovered the bloody corpses of Tanisha and Kilewo.

Imaro had since discovered his heritage and his destiny. Pomphis, Katisa and Mkwayo hoped that what he had learned about his kinship with the Cloud Striders would shake him out of his dark self-pity. They hoped that his war on himself had ceased.

"My people will accept it," Mkwayo said.

“There is more at stake than being accepted by the Ngwika,” Msipo said. I hope that he realizes it.

- Yes.

It was Rabir who had just intervened, for the first time that afternoon. He exchanged an unfriendly look with Msipo. Katisa decided it was time to move on to another topic.

"Mwazwenyi still refuses to talk to me," she said, looking at Mkwayo.

The monomatapa rolled his eyes, as if seeking help from the gods.

When he ascended the throne, Mkwayo refused to take a second wife as a prophecy told him that Katisa would one day return. When this prophecy had been fulfilled, Mkwayo had learned that their lost child, whose name Katisa refused to give, would be the only one she would ever have.

In order to satisfy his rank as monomatapa, Mkwayo took on other wives after raising Katisa to the status of dakamatapa. These wives were the daughters of families and nobles from the main kingdoms of the empire. One of these, Mwazwenyi, was related to the former monomatapa of Amanyani, whose death in battle had given the throne to Mkwayo. Eight rains before, Mwazwenyi had given him a son, whom they named Peyisai.

Mkwayo had had other children afterwards, but Peyisai was his first recognized son and, therefore, the ***benematapa,*** heir. But the arrival of Imaro had deprived him of this title. Mwazwenyi made no secret of his fury and bitterness towards Katisa and Imaro.

"I'll take care of Mwazwenyi," Mkwayo said dryly.

"They say she takes Peyisai to a mhondoro temple ," ***Katisa*** insisted.

Mkwayo frowned. The ***mhondoro*** was an essential element of the religion of the peoples of Maguvurunde. This involved calling upon the spirits of the Great Ancestors in hopes that their qualities would be passed on to their descendants. The spirits came to possess the ***mhondoro priestesses,*** who in turn transmitted the ancestral traits to those who desired them.

The priestesses jealously guarded the secrets of ***mhondoro.*** On more than one occasion, their prerogatives had clashed with those of the monomatapa and, until now, his will had always prevailed.

There was nothing wrong with Mwazwenyi driving Peyisai to the ***mhondoro temple.*** But it was the first time she had done it. And this, just after his son had lost the title of benematapa…

Worry gnawed at Mkwayo like a dog through a bone. He stood up, meaning that the discussion was over. Like Imaro, he could dominate a gathering with his mere physical presence.

"I'll talk to Mwazwenyi," he said.

He extended his hand to Katisa. She took it and stood up to stand beside him. She was a tall woman, but she didn't come above her shoulder. She gave him a look that made it clear that she didn't think a simple talk would solve the problem.

Mkwayo let out a deep sigh. Of all the conflicts in which he was presently embroiled, the one between his wives was by far the most difficult. He remembered, to his chagrin, that his brother Nkwana had always told him that warriors were easier to deal with.

All the ***mhondoro*** temples were filled with supplicants who sought to invoke their ancestors for help in the impending war with the Naama. But the one who was a day's ride north of Mji-Amanyani had no visitors. Her priestesses awaited the arrival of Mwazwenyi and Peyisai and until their wishes were fulfilled no one else would be allowed to enter the temple.

The soldiers who had escorted Mwazwenyi and Peyisai were grazing their ***mbizi*** near the walls of the temple built around the rocky outcrops.
Clasping his son's hand tightly, Mwazwenyi resolutely climbed the path that led to the entrance of the temple.

Without even the beaded garment that would have identified her rank, Mwazwenyi would have been instantly recognizable as an ***ndau.*** The driving port; neck stiffness; piercing brown eyes capable of silencing and frightening a servant with a single glance; the involuntary sneer of contempt when she addressed those she considered her subordinates, that is to say most people… Mwazwenyi embodied the arrogance and intolerance that had reigned over Maguvurunde until that the Thunderbird chooses Mkwayo to unify the war-torn region.

Peyisai stumbled on a rock, nearly knocking her mother over. She tugged on her son's arm, irritated.

"Be careful," she snapped. How can you be clumsy like that, when it's the most important day of your life?

Peyisai did not answer. His face, a mixture of Abamba and Maguvurunde features, was sullen. It was always like that when he was with his mother. He was tall for his age, and well built, like all the children of Mkwayo. He did not understand why Mwazwenyi was driving him to the temple. Her puberty rites would not begin for several rains.

It was then that he was supposed to meet his Great Ancestors…not now. But more than anything, Peyisai didn't understand why her mother hated Imaro. His found brother had only spent a short time in Mji-Amanyani, but Peyisai liked him. But Mwazwenyi had ordered him to be distant towards Katisa's son. As always, he had obeyed his mother.

Mwazwenyi was worried. She found herself wishing that the Abamba lineage of her family wasn't so apparent in her son's features and that the Lightning Bird had never chosen Mkwayo to ascend the throne. But the Lightning Bird was the most important of the Maguvurunde beliefs, the one by which an Abamba could become a monomatapa. Katisa's return had shaken Mwazwenyi even more. It was no longer one, but ***two*** foreign barbarians who had become masters of the Amanyani.

When Mkwayo took Mwazwenyi as a concubine, she gave him the son she thought would be heir to the throne. Mkwayo had made himself master of the rest of Maguvurunde and Mwazwenyi had been happy to know that Peyisai would inherit the empire forged by the monomatapa. It was then that Imaro had arisen, and Mwazwenyi's carefully planned dreams had been shattered.

There was madness in Mwazwenyi's soul now…madness she took great pains to conceal. The most important breach in the wall that hid his true feelings was his difficulty in hiding his revulsion towards Katisa. This foreigner, who was neither from Maguvurunde nor from Abamba, wore the crown of the dakamatapa!

She and Peyisai were close to the temple entrance now; a black crack in a sun-drenched brick wall. Peyisai stopped just ahead. He had a sudden premonition: if he walked through that door, he would never get out...

"I don't want to come in," he said.

Mwazwenyi spun him around. The boy shivered at the light of madness he saw in his mother's eyes. Her fingers dug cruelly into his shoulders. When she spoke, her voice was a hiss that escaped from between her clenched jaws.

"It doesn't matter what you don't want," she said. We are here to claim your birthright, the spirit of Mhlanga, the Great Ancestor of the clan that rules this land from the moment a man laid stone upon another stone. You will become Mhlanga, despite the stain of your Abamba blood. So we'll see who will become monomatapa!

Forcing the terrified boy forward, Mwazwenyi pushed him towards the front door. He stumbled, caught himself, and looked up at his mother. He spoke through his eyes, imploring her to get him away from this temple. She didn't answer. He wanted to get out of her embrace and run away. But he also knew he could never escape what his mother had become.

Peyisai was Mkwayo's son. He decided to act as his father would have wanted. Back straight, bearing assured, he walks through the door. The darkness engulfed him entirely. Mwazwenyi followed suit.

"We'll see," she muttered as the temple swallowed her. We
let's see...

They were alive...

Survival was the single factor that united the survivors of the Kitwana conquest, transcending and encompassing now-defunct barriers of rank, wealth, or craft. They lived where so many others had died.

They were curled up in makeshift shelters, far from the walls of their capital, Mlongo. The Naama ignored them. It was as if the city

itself, not its inhabitants, was the main concern of the invaders.

But the city was just as important to those who had fled. As they snatched their meager sustenance from the land, they plotted, plotted and spied. And they were waiting for a word from their king in exile, who was said to be alive, somewhere in the west.

They were alive. And they hoped...

5.

LES TSUBI

Jua the sun scrutinized with his eye of white flame the Tsubi which melted on the territory of the Ntinde clan like a swarm of grasshoppers.

Half the horde threw themselves on the cattle of the Ntinde. The animals roared in terror, running away from the attackers. Their hooves trampled the pastures, reducing the plain to a muddy patch, their eyes rolling in terror. Humpbacked males spun around and charged at their assailants. But for every Tsubi trampled or gored, three more would arise, as if the invaders were magically multiplying. There was no escape.

The rest of the attackers set fire to the cultivated fields. The Indian warriors tried to stop them. Unaware of the impressive numerical superiority of their opponents, the Ntinde threw themselves on their shields like waves crashing relentlessly on rocks.

Spears clashed in a maelstrom of steel. Clubs slammed into shields. Axes bit into the flesh. Vociferations, howls, war cries broke through the bellowing of cattle and the crackling of flames in the fields.

While the Indie warriors offered fierce resistance, the invaders seemed possessed by spirits that deflected weapon tips and moved defenders' shields in ways that made them vulnerable.

When they had sighted the tsubi horde, the Ntinde had sent runners to Galeka, the central ***kraal*** of the Ngwika. They knew they would have to hold off the Tsubi for as long as possible, until the ***nkosi*** Nkwana could arrive with an army. A Ntinde fought as long as he could stand on his feet.

Before them, the Tsubi had launched lightning attacks on isolated ***kraals .*** Brimming with their sense of invincibility, they adopted the same

tactics against the tribe that dominated the eastern part of the Highlands, the tribe that had produced an emperor. Despite the disturbing tales that had spread across the Highlands, the Ngwika had never doubted the outcome of the confrontation with the cattle killers. Faced with the reality of the invasion, the Ntinde were no longer at all sure of being able to contain the advance of their adversaries, even when the reinforcements were there.

Starvation had reduced the Tsubi to skin-wrapped skeletons. Their arms were hardly thicker than the shafts of the spears they wielded. Yet those spears struck relentlessly, their tips dripping with dark blood. Leather shields that should have been heavy for emaciated warriors to handle felt as light as leaves. Though harassed, the Tsubi moved like grasshoppers, leaping and spinning in a dance that ended in death. Their faces were horrible to behold. Their eyes were gleaming needlepoints deep in empty sockets. Their cheekbones protruded under a thin layer of skin. Their lips were drawn back in a deathly grin. They were like skulls whose flesh had long withered away.

By all logic, the Tsubi warriors should have been dead, simply unable to stand. As for brandishing their weapons and killing, it was unthinkable. And their number… The Tsubi had always been a secretive people, imbued with mysticism, avoiding contact with other tribes as much as possible. No one knew how many there were in their isolated ***kraals .*** Rare were those who would have imagined that they would be able to mobilize an army as substantial as those of the Ngwika or Shingane.

Fear gnawed at the Ntinde. ***What keeps them alive?*** they wondered, as they fought to protect the cattle and crops that were the Tsubi's primary targets. What was that power that flowed through the stiffened limbs of their adversaries, and enabled them to plunge their spears into the flesh of men and beasts? By what sorcery were they as hard to skewer as feathers fluttering in the breeze? And what was the origin of this song that the Tsubi whispered all the time in battle?

"Cattle of the gods!" Harvest of the gods! For Nongkwaze! For Nongkwaze!

The Indian warriors fought and died. And they began to be afraid while praying for Nkwana's forces to arrive.

The Ngwika were advancing north, with Nkwana, Solosha and Imaro at their head. They progressed at a regular trot which swallowed up the distance which separated Galeka from the land of the Ntinde. This pace allowed them to conserve enough energy to fight once they arrived at their destination.

When the columns of fighters passed the ***kraals*** of other clans, warriors came to join them, each new contingent taking a pre-established place in the formation. Men of the Tshawe, Ndlambe, Gwale and other clans swelled the ranks of Nkwana's forces until the ground vibrated beneath their feet and the mighty predators of the hills retreated and found refuge in caves and forests to the sound of their approach.

The Ngwika made fun of the sumptuous feathered decorations favored by other tribes. Their battle dress consisted of their leather loincloth and ***the ubu-hlalu*** around their necks. Their shields were strapped to their backs, their cudgels and axes hung from the ends of rings attached to the belts of their loincloths.

Their combat spears resembled long-hilted swords. Of all the warriors who responded to Nkwana's call, only Imaro had a real sword. The Ngwika knew this kind of weapon, following their battles against the soldiers of Maguvurunde, but they preferred their spears. If Imaro, ***the izizalwana who*** came from afar, chose to keep his sword, the Ngwika would not oppose this choice.

Imaro remained silent as he ran alongside the ***nkosi*** and Solosha.

The three men had already discussed strategy with the tribe's war advisors. But the Tsubi were unlike any foe they had encountered. The Ngwika battle plans may well be of no use once the fight begins.

Imaro hadn't had time to speak with Nomvula. But he had seen her, standing among the crowd of women, children and old men who had gathered to say goodbye. Nomvula gave him a brief smile, and he replied the same. Others also smiled, observing the scene: it was rare that something happened in a ***kraal*** like Galeka without everyone knowing it very quickly...

The smoke rising from the hills of the territory ntinde warns the men of Nkwana of the important advance of the Tsubi. Staring at the gray swirls, the warriors swore as they thought of the lost crops that fueled the fires.

Nkwana shouted an order which was relayed along the entire length of the column. Immediately, the men removed the shields from their backs and put them on their arms. Gigantic ovals in spotted buffalo skin, they protected them from the neck to the ankles. It took strong arms to hold shields such as these firmly while running, or wielding other weapons.

On a second order from the ***nkosi,*** the warriors deployed and began to climb the hill that led into Indian territory. With a precision born of a lifetime of training, the Ngwika arranged themselves into combat units: small groups to harass the enemy, the main body, the reserve, and the wings. The place assigned to Imaro was in front of the main troop.
As he drew his sword, a tingle in the bracelets of the kandisa warned him of the presence of ***mchawi,*** of the sorcery of the Mashataan.

Before leaving Galeka, the warriors had taken part in ***uku-kafula,*** the ceremony in anticipation of battle. This included the ingestion of a concoction made from blood and roots, prepared by the war doctor, an old man who had once served alongside Nkwana and Mkwayo's father. The potion served to ensure that luck, as well as skill, would be in favor of the Ngwika in the coming battle.

When Imaro's turn came, the old man did not allow him
to raise the jug to his lips.

"You already have your protection," he said, showing the bracelets.

Once at the top, the Ngwika watched the unequal battle between the Ntinde and the Tsubi. They saw that the skeletal Tsubi were tough and elusive in a way that defied all logic. They saw that the Tsubi had attacked the cattle first, and then their human opponents. Some fell, but it was nothing compared to the losses of their opponents.

An Indian warrior ran up to them. The man was panting, out of breath, and he looked expectantly at Nkwana. But the ***nkosi*** watched the Tsubi below.

These aren't enemies you can defeat in a lightning charge, he thought. ***They are like ghosts who do not yet know that they***

are already dead...

He glanced at Imaro. He had taken the warrior aside just before the march on the Ntinde region began.

"You're not like your father," Nkwana had told him. Mkwayo was still looking outward. This is why he accomplished what no Abamba had succeeded in doing before him. You are different. You look within. You have to start looking outward...

The warrior had not answered.

"What do you see, Imaro?" asked Nkwana now.

Imaro was silent for a few moments before answering.

"Are there enough of us to surround the Tsubi?"
he finally asked.

Solosha's eyes lit up as he suddenly understood.

"Yes, ***izizalwana,*** that's what you have to do!" he said, turning to Nkwana. What do you think, father?

"That's what Mkwayo would have done," said the ***nkosi.***

Nkwana started giving orders to the warriors in charge of the different units. The Ngwika were going to adopt a combat formation unprecedented for them. There was no time to practice...

Suddenly, a dark tragedy began at the foot of the hills. A calf had managed to escape the carnage. His mother was dead, a tsubi spear stuck in her throat. Obeying an instinct that countless generations of domestication had failed to dilute, the calf fled and fear gave him wings. His pursuer was even faster. Leaping up on its bony legs, a lone Tsubi caught up with the calf almost directly at the foot of the slope at the top of which the Ngwika stood. Using his strength to drag the animal to the ground, the Tsubi brandished his spear.

"Ajunge!" Imaro cried, speaking the name of the Ilyassai God-Spear for the first time in many rains.

His rage at this spectacle exceeded that of the Ngwika. For his father's people, the slaughter of cattle was just a simple loss of animals. For an Ilyassai, it was murder.

Ngwika spears were designed to strike at close range and not for throwing. Imaro didn't care. He grabbed his spear and threw it with all his might. The weapon flew at the speed of an arrow.

Before the Tsubi could bring down his weapon, Imaro's missile hit its target. The spear had been thrown with such force that the lower jaw

du Tsubi was torn from the blow, the shaft sticking out of the middle of her face like the stem of a plant growing in bloody soil.

The Tsubi fell backwards. His weak fingers dropped the spear. The calf rose to its feet and rushed up the hill. But when he spotted the warriors, he panicked and headed back in the other direction, away from the smell of steel. For a second, all eyes atop the hill were trained on Imaro. There was admiration tinged with fear in the eyes of the Ngwikas. And another emotion was added to this one, an emotion that they were reluctant to

number.

Nkwana broke the enchantment that kept his warriors silent.

" ***Pakati!"*** he exclaimed, cutting through the ambient din. To attack !

" ***Pakati!"*** echoed the warriors.

And the Ngwika army charged down the hill, leaping with a

foot as sure as that of the antelopes. Imaro was already running ahead of them.

The Tsubi looked at the new opponents with blank eyes.
Their features betrayed no emotion when they saw the Ngwika rushing at them. But the Ntinde let out a cry of joy when they saw the ***nkosi*** and his warriors.

Nkwana's army split into two unequal groups. The smaller, led by Imaro, advanced in a tight mass of spears and shields toward the lake of blood that had become the Ntinde pasture.
Most of the Tsubi were concentrated there.

The larger group split into two columns that ran in opposite directions, quickly turning into semi-circles, each man separated from his neighbor by no more than one step. While running at the head of one of the columns, Nkwana prayed to his ancestors that Imaro would be able to hold the Tsubi in position until the two semi-circles could operate their junction. It was the only chance that the battle plan they had adopted could work.

Imaro was the first to reach the Tsubi. A skeletal warrior advanced to meet him. It almost looked like it was floating; his feet barely touched the ground. But there was iron power behind the spear thrust he delivered.

Imaro's blade springs forth. With a resounding crash, the tip of the Tsubi's spear fell into the grass, severed by the edge of Imaro's sword. The Tsubi backed away, but not fast enough. Imaro slit his throat. Pushing a

strangled gurgling, the man crashed to the floor. Two spectral warriors took his place in the next second.

The Ngwikas had caught up with Imaro. Shields pressed against their bodies, they pressed forward. Their spears and axes darted, striking and retreating like the tails of scorpions. Enlivened by the sight of their comrades, the near-defeated Ntinde threw themselves on their assailants with renewed fury.

Other Tsubi fell, but they remained almost elusive, driving their opponents crazy. Too often their spear thrusts only split the air. The Tsubi's responses were more precise and the Ngwika were falling in number. As soon as they had some room to maneuver, the Tsubi were as hard to hit as a swarm of flies.

Imaro was even faster than the Tsubi, and their incredible ability to dodge attacks vanished when faced with him. The two warriors who had come to confront him after the first were writhing at his feet. Disregarding all caution, Imaro leapt into their ranks like a lion among a herd of jackals. As the Tsubi took in the devastation he was causing, they began to walk away… and found themselves confronted by the spears of Imaro's companions.

However, he couldn't be everywhere. Cattle were still dying, the fields were still aflame, the thatch of the dwellings was ablaze as the Tsubi ravaged the reserves of the Ntinde. If Nkwana's men did not quickly close their circle, Imaro's exploits would be useless...

Suddenly, a cry of triumph burst from thousands of throats. The Ngwika thus announced through the hills that they had just surrounded the Tsubi. The warriors who had fought alongside Imaro came to join the circle. Tsubi blood smeared their weapons and their skin. Even though their faces remained as unreadable as death masks, the Tsubi's eyes were glued to the spiky steel forest that surrounded them. They had long since stopped chanting their strange battle cry.

There were no leaders among them. They thought and acted as one man, bound to the ***mchawi*** that kept them alive when they should have been long dead. Now their movements were haphazard and chaotic. Spears wavered in their skeletal hands. Their movements were hesitant and awkward. And

yet the Tsubi continued to fight as the circle grew ever closer. They fought like that was all there was to it.

That's how Imaro fought, too. He had not joined the Ngwika circle. He fought alone, washing his blade in the blood of the Tsubi. He himself was bleeding from several wounds, but none were serious. His feet and body were in constant motion, making him a difficult target for the Tsubi's spears. They lined up around him like a pack of wild dogs. But a pack of hounds couldn't dare hope to bring down a lion.

"Is Imaro mad?" Solosha asked Nkwana.

The two men ran the fights and made sure the holes in the ranks are immediately filled. “In battle, I think that's always the case,” the ***nkosi replied.***

He shook his head. ***It sure looks like you'll never be like Mkwayo, Imaro, he*** thought sadly.

- Look ! cried a Ntinde who had joined Nkwana.

Three Tsubi had just plunged their spears into Imaro's shield. Now they were trying to pin him down as two other assailants came from behind. The Ntinde rushed towards the three warriors, before stopping suddenly. Incredulous, he saw Imaro snatch the three spears from the hands of his assailants by violently pulling on his shield, before throwing it at the two Tsubi behind him. These collapsed, hit head-on by the shafts of spears. Brandishing clubs thicker than their skinny arms, the first three Tsubi tried to corner Imaro.

The reach of his sword was far superior. Three quick boots and the Tsubi were on the ground, adding their blood to the pool that was already soaking the grass.

“If this is madness, then maybe I should give up on being sane. of wit, Solosha said thoughtfully as he looked at Imaro.

"Are you willing to pay the price he pays for it?" Nkwana asked dryly.

The response Solosha was about to make died in his throat as he stared into his father's face. Nkwana's expression was grim, and there was an unusual hardness to his features.

The Ntinde who had come to Imaro's aid skewered one of the last two Tsubi. Imaro's sword did the same with his opponent. The two men stared at each other on either side of the corpses. A fearful admiration

reflected on Ntinde's face. Imaro's read something quite different… Exhaustion.

Because Imaro was a weapon. He gave himself entirely to the fight against those he was born to face: the Mashataan, the Erriten, and all their satellites, human and inhuman. Nkwana's voice reached the warrior's ears.

- Imaro! Remember our plan! Return to the circle!

Remembering the strategy he, Nkwana and Solosha had agreed on, Imaro looked at the Tsubi. The skeletal warriors were beginning to ebb. Fear made their sunken eyes gleam, and their movements were more confused than coordinated.

"Stay behind me," Imaro told the Ntinde.

The other obeyed as if Imaro were an ***nkosi.*** While the Ntinde protected its rear, Imaro guided it through the disordered ranks of the Tsubi, killing a large number of opponents in the process. They quickly joined Nkwana and Solosha.

“The Tsubi are at our mercy now,” Nkwana said. Thanks to you, ***izizalwana.***

You could read neither pleasure nor triumph on the face of the ***nkosi*** when he uttered these words.

The Tsubi gave a final cry of war and defiance, promising cattle and crops for the gods. And they continued to fight, more like automatons than with courage. But the Ngwika's encirclement tactic locked in and compressed the Tsubi, depriving them of the advantage of mobility.

— ***In the middle!*** ordonna Nkwana.

The Ngwika warriors stretched their arms back until their elbows were in line with their shoulders. Then they struck, throwing their spears as Imaro had done at the start of the battle. A rain of steel fell on the Tsubi and decimated them. Before they could think of doing the same, the Ngwika pounced on them, bringing down their maces and axes with devastating effect. Stepping over the corpses, the Ngwika launched themselves sinisterly into their fierce work, slaughtering the cattle killers without pity.

The hills of Ntinde and the blood red of the setting sun seemed to reflect each other when the massacre was finally over. No Tsubi escaped.
None had tried to evade the cord which had closed

inevitably. Death no longer frightened them. They had walked by her side since the day Nongkwaze had seen her vision in the pool. They fought, they fell in battle; they were trampled on and their bones shattered under the feet of their adversaries.

The Ngwika victory had a price. Far too many had fallen for the survivors to rejoice. Solemnly, the Ngwika prepared their dead for the return to the ***kraals*** of their clans. The most urgent care of the wounded was attended to as well as possible; later they would be examined by the ***isangoma,*** the healers.

Other warriors performed a task that seemed strange to Imaro. Walking among the corpses of the Tsubi, they examined the bodies for wounds in the stomach. Corpses with such wounds were left as they were. The others had their stomachs pierced with a spear after a ritual phrase had been recited.

"Why are they doing this?" Imaro asked Solosha.

" ***Umetsho,*** " Solosha replied.

"Okay, but what kind ***of umetsho?"***

"We do this to free the spirits of those who fell in battle. Otherwise, the spirits will proliferate inside the corpse and bring it back to life.

"Why don't you release the spirits of your own dead?"

"Our dead will be buried among their ancestors," Solosha replied. Their spirits will join those who left before them. Only the spirits of enemies should be freed this way.

Imaro remained silent after that. From all the rains that had passed after he left the Ilyassai, he had learned that there were many beliefs about what happened to the spirits of the dead, and what to do to keep them from returning. poison the lives of the living. The Ilyassai thought they would inhabit the spirit of lions until a child was born, which they then invested. Imaro no longer shared this belief. But he hadn't yet made his choice among the many other beliefs he had encountered.

"I'll remember that when I meet Bohu," said Imaro.

Solosha looked at him oddly, then looked away.

A hand awoke Nomvula unceremoniously, interrupting a dream she immediately forgot. His eyes snapped open. At first she saw nothing but the darkness of her itembiso. ***Then, thanks to the slight***

brightness provided by the entrance, she could make out the dark shape curled up near her couch.

Nomvula held her breath as she suddenly recognized the figure. The light in Bengeshe's cave had been much the same. However, he had always been told that the umuti ***never left their lairs...***

" ***Come with me, my daughter," Bengeshe said, anticipating the silent question.***

" ***Why?" Nomvula asked, even though she already knew what*** the umuti was going to say.

— ***It is time to pay the price of*** the icantu.

6.

I AM COMING WITH YOU

The Ngwika army spent the night encamped near the ***itembisos*** ntinde. The fires in the fields had been extinguished at the end of the battle. The surviving cattle had been recaptured. The calf that Imaro had saved was never found. A hyena might have carried it off. It had been possible to save some meat and grain, but it would not be enough to feed the Ntinde until the next wet season. The people of the clan would have to be supported until the new season, when they could sow again.

Nkwana had spent most of the night deciding where the different Indie families would go. They had family in other clans… but there were also the jealousies, the rivalries, the memories of insults and mockery dating for some of several generations, but which had never been forgotten. The task ultimately proved far more exhausting for Nkwana than the battle against the Tsubi.

"Do you think the Tsubi are wiped out for good?" Solosha asked her father.

He and Nkwana were seated outside a makeshift shelter at the foot of a grassy slope. Even though dawn was just beginning to break, the men were already starting to drink ***utywala.***

"Not yet," said Nkwana. But those we killed must have been the bulk of their army. But not its entirety, however.
The Tsubi may be mad, or bewitched, but I really find it hard to believe they threw all their might into this attack.

"You're right," Solosha agreed. No one can say how many Tsubi are. It's possible they're coming in droves through the hills, preparing to fall on us unawares right now.

"I don't think so," said Nkwana. Imaro told me that his bracelets would warn him if other Tsubi were approaching. For now, this is not the

cas.

“Imaro…” Solosha muttered, disturbed.

“My son,” Nkwana asked. Something is wrong ?

He sensed Solosha troubled, but he wanted his son to come clean.

“Imaro is ***Izizalwana,*** and I want to be his friend,” Solosha said slowly. But, sometimes… he scares me.

"Because he fights like a demon?"

“No,” Solosha replied. Because he ***likes*** to fight like a demon. It kills like normal people breathe. It seems that he lives only for that.

Nkwana fell silent. He knew it had been difficult for Solosha to say how he felt about Imaro. He, too, sometimes felt uneasy in the presence of his brother's son.

His thoughts shifted from Imaro to the Tsubi. ***How do they stay alive without eating?*** He had asked himself the question dozens of times while fighting against these walking skeletons. He had not found a satisfactory answer.

Omens circulated all over the Highlands. Nkwana was certain that the ***mfecane*** was simply the start of fighting that would spread throughout the region. He was equally certain that Imaro, ***the izizalwana*** from afar, was crucial to ending this ***mfecane.***

Imaro was different, yes. But there had to be a reason for this difference. It couldn't be otherwise...

“Mkwayo and I didn't have much time to talk when I first met Imaro,” Nkwana said finally. But your uncle told me that Imaro had a special role to play in a struggle that goes far beyond the Highlands. Rejoice that he is with us, rather than against us.

Solosha smiles.

- You always have the right sentence.

"It's in the family," Nkwana replied, smiling in turn.

They savored a moment of silence, until they heard footsteps behind them. They looked up and saw Imaro approaching. Uninvited, he sat down opposite his two parents. Both men lost their smiles when they saw the expression on the warrior's features.

“I'm not going back to Galeka with you,” he said.

- Why that ? Nkwana asked, even though he suspected the answer.

Imaro leva les bras.

"Bohu," he said. The bracelets tell me he's not far away. I have to find… soon.

- Where is he ? Solosha asked.

Imaro brought his arms together so the bracelets were touching. The sun was above the horizon now. Its glow came to play on the metal, which seemed to absorb it and not reflect it. Imaro held out his hands to the east.

"The bracelets lead me in this direction," he said.

"Towards Tsubi territory," Nkwana replied.

"That's where I have to go," Imaro said.

"I'll provide you with all the warriors you need," he promised. Nkwana. After what you did yesterday, they would follow you anywhere.

"No," said Imaro. I have to go alone. Besides, you'll need all your men for the next battle...against Shingane. When I kill Bohu, his ***mchawi*** will end, and it will be easier for you to rid the Highlands of the damage caused by his spell.

'All the same… rubbing shoulders with someone like Bohu, alone…' began Nkwana.

"He won't be alone," Solosha said, then turned to Imaro. I come with you, ***izizalwana.***

Nkwana opened her mouth to protest, but closed it again without speaking. He understood that this was something Solosha had to do. Having admitted his fear, Solosha now had to stand by Imaro's side to regain his self-esteem. Nkwana was unsure whether he himself would have done the same.

"No," said Imaro. I have to go alone.

"You don't know the Highlands well enough," Solosha argued. You come from the flatlands. You will need someone to guide you through Tsubi territory.

Imaro raised his bracelets again.

“These will guide me.

"They can only show the direction," Solosha persisted. They can't really guide you like I can.

Solosha's face was frozen in a determined expression that his father knew only too well.

"I'm going with you, Imaro," he repeated. I'll either be by your side or behind you. But I'm leaving.

Imaro looked at his cousin. He remembered the times when Pomphis had been just as insistent in wanting to accompany him in perilous circumstances. Pomphis had survived those adventures… and he was far from the warrior that Solosha was. The son of the ***nkosi*** was quick in action and skilful in the use of weapons. And he knew the Highlands.

— Bohu is a dangerous enemy. Opposing him could cost you your life.

"I'm willing to take that risk if you are," Solosha said.

Solosha held out her hand. The two warriors seized each other by the wrist, and their agreement was thus sealed. Nkwana, who had remained silent, fought a losing battle not to show his apprehension.

At Nkwana's insistence, Imaro and Solosha delayed their departure for a day so that sacks of food could be prepared for them. They would need it, Nkwana claimed, for it was likely that food had become scarce in the lands ravaged by the Tsubi. Imaro had agreed to reluctantly.

He spent the day dodging requests from dozens of warriors who wanted to join him and Solosha. Many of them came from the surviving Ntinde. But Imaro remained adamant. Only Solosha would accompany him. Nkwana had a hard time stemming the wave of discontent caused by Imaro's stubbornness.

The next morning, Imaro decided he couldn't take the commotion any longer.

"We're leaving now," he told Solosha.

Friendships that had lasted since the rites of passage were beginning to be strained since it was known that only Solosha was allowed to accompany the warrior who was already a legend. Two women from the Ntinde tribe solemnly offered Imaro and Solosha large leather bags filled with dried meat and millet biscuits. Nkwana had made sure that Imaro's bag contained only goat meat.

With words of gratitude, the warriors strapped the bags to their backs, in place of the shields that would have hindered them more than anything during their journey. Then they squeezed Nkwana's wrists. Without further ado, they turned and headed east. Flashes of light from the tips of their spears indicated their progress until they cleared the top of a hill.

A shiver like the icy wind of the rainy season gripped Nkwana when he saw the silhouette of his son disappear on the horizon. At that moment, the ***nkosi*** was certain that he would never see Solosha again. He thought of Imaro, too. But these thoughts were imbued with an uncommon hostility towards the warrior. To the east of the Ngwika lands, the slopes softened and the hills began to thin out. Some of the shallow bowls between them were heavily wooded, like small forests that acted as ramparts between the grassy slopes. Others were naked, like miniature versions of Tamburure.

If times hadn't been so perilous, Imaro and Solosha might have stopped to hunt in the forests, or visit the ***kraals*** perched on the hillsides. But it was the ***mfecane*** and the damage caused by the Tsubi's madness was eerily evident.

Expanses of charred stems marked the location of the fields. Heaps of bones, through which the wind blew in a long sepulchral plain, and gnawed to the marrow by scavengers, lay in the pastures. The remains of animals regularly gave way to human skeletons, men who had tried to defend the herds under their care against the attacks of the Tsubi.

No one had undertaken to give a burial to the shepherds, nor to the slaughtered cattle. The survivors of the massacres had more pressing problems.

A few goats had escaped the Tsubi's spears. They were less well regarded than the cattle, and the Tsubi had not tried too hard to pierce them with their spears. But there weren't enough animals to feed those who had previously herded them, and now the goats were running away, ruthlessly hunted by their former keepers.

The warriors had a hard time avoiding crossing paths with the survivors of the ***mfecane.*** The ***mchawi*** that enabled the Tsubi to subsist without food did not extend to their victims. Once their reserves were exhausted, the people of the hills found themselves forced to resort to gathering and hunting, the way of life of their ancestors.

But there were too many of them to be able to subsist on such a way of life. Game fled the region, hunted by an ever-increasing number of hunters. Trees and thickets were quickly stripped of their

fruits and their berries. Famine had just gripped the Highlands in its inexorable iron grip.

Imaro and Solosha were closing in on Tsubi territory. They passed ***kraals,*** large and small, whose only inhabitants were the vultures perched on the ***itembisos.*** Bones of all kinds were scattered on the paths that separated the houses. The silence of the ***kraals*** was broken only by the heavy flapping of the wings of the vultures as they soared in search of some fresher prey.

The two warriors only ate in small quantities. Their carcasses became leaner as their journey lengthened and the days became weeks. They weren't quite as gaunt, however, as the living ghosts they sometimes encountered...the people who had somehow survived the Tsubi's depredations on their lands.

They had just entered an unknown region of Solosha. Only the imperious call of Imaro's bracelets told them they were still moving in the right direction.

Even so, Solosha's general knowledge of the Highlands landforms allowed them to avoid the hordes of sunken-eyed men and women who haunted the hills, searching for any food. Famine had reduced them to the status of human hyenas, predators. The sight of the two well-fed warriors carrying supplies would have driven them mad.

Imaro only agreed to avoid the victims of the ***mfecane*** because fighting them would have meant slowing their progress towards Bohu. His bracelets were now almost useless. He could sense Bohu's presence the same way he once sensed the presence of predators on the Tamburure.

Soon, a voice whispered in the warrior's mind. ***Soon…***

"What do those two marks on your arm mean?" Solosha asked Imaro.

Imaro looked at him in surprise. It had been weeks since he had thought of ***the icantu.***

The warriors had pitched camp in a cleft in the hillside, overlooking the streak of desolation that once served as home to thousands of Tsubi. The hills in this area were more rugged. Rocky peaks and cliffs split the peaks where

the grass only grew sparsely. The aloes, which added color to the hills everywhere else, did not grow here. As the travelers entered Tsubi territory, it became apparent that some tribes had not taken part in the expedition into Ngwika territory. In the ***kraals*** that Imaro and Solosha had avoided, there were still spear-wielding specters in numbers large enough to cause major destruction if they ever attacked. Now the warriors seemed to be resting, like weapons stored in an armory.

Women and children still lived in villages surrounded by ashes and bones. From their hiding place, the two strangers saw them using their pestle and mortar, but they weren't grinding anything.
Others ate greedily from bowls that contained nothing but dust. Babies with shriveled faces and lanky bodies suckled uselessly from their mothers' saggy, empty breasts. In the meadows, shepherds watched over heaps of bones. In the fields, women gathered crops that only they could see.

The hallucinations set up by Bohu were still effective.
The Tsubi were sincerely convinced that they were reaping the feast of the gods.

Imaro and Solosha felt some sympathy for the Tsubi, despite all the destruction they were causing. They knew they were nothing but instruments in the service of Bohu. Once the Naama were done with them, they would get rid of them.

When will the kandisa get rid of me? Imaro wondered. Solosha's question echoed in his mind. He watched the latter, who held his gaze. The two warriors had become closer since the beginning of their journey. Imaro sometimes wondered what his life would be like if he had grown up among the Ngwika and not among the Ilyassai. Because despite their camaraderie, there was one major difference between him and his cousin. Solosha was open; what he showed was what he was inside. But beneath Imaro's exterior, on the other hand, were buried many mysteries.
Solosha was determined to learn what was behind Imaro's stoicism.

"An ***icantu*** made them?" Solosha inquired.

Imaro was silent for a long time. Then he spoke, slowly, as if the words were coming out of his mouth against his will.

"If you mean a transparent snake whose bite causes love fever, then it was an ***icantu,*** " he said.

"Did Nomvula give it to you?" Solosha asked.

Imaro nodded.

"Why did she need it?"

Imaro again remained silent for some time. He knew that Solosha knew what had happened to Tanisha and Kilewo. But Solosha didn't know the extent of the devastation these deaths had caused.

Solosha had now almost joined Pomphis as one of Imaro's friends. He had risked his life to lead the warrior through the death trap that the Highlands had become since the ***mfecane began.***

Imaro knew Solosha's secrets. He knew that for all his faith in him, Solosha doubted his worth was even half as good as that of his father, or his uncle Mkwayo. The two men had cast a shadow of doubt over Solosha. This doubt was the reason he had insisted on accompanying Imaro on his hunt.

Once he proved his worth, or died trying, the shadow would disappear. ***Prove its value.*** Imaro knew the subject well. And it was for this reason that he explained to his cousin that Nomvula had needed ***the icantu*** to bring out the desire that he himself had been unable to recognize.

And he told Solosha more than that.

He told her about his life among the Ilyassai and how he had won his warrior training. He told her of his days among the ***haramia,*** and how there again he had proved his worth. He spoke of the rains of Cush, where the cities were gigantic and the magic ancient. There he had learned to forge iron and had proved that he could be a citizen of a civilized country. And, finally, what result?

"Until the moment when Bohu is stretched out at my feet, I must continue to prove myself, he said. But when that is accomplished, who will I be then?

Imaro shrugged in response to his own question. He had been talking for quite a while. The sun had set, and the brief interval of twilight was nearly over. The travelers had not lit a fire. Their faces were in shadows, indecipherable.

Solosha remained silent for some time. But he knew now
that he was not the only one fighting against his own doubts.

“It was dangerous of Nomvula to go see an ***umuti,*** ” Solosha said finally. They never do anything without asking a higher price than what they offer.

"I don't know what she paid," Imaro said. She never told me.
“We'll have to learn that when we return to Galeka,” Solosha said.

Imaro was about to ask what ***the umuti*** might have demanded when a high-pitched howl tore through the gathering darkness, and then the hills spewed out a horde of shadowy figures that swooped down on the two companions.

Katisa and Pomphis sat alone in the private part of the dakamatapa ***'s imba. They shared a bowl of sliced melon. Their conversation was solemn. It was about Imaro…***

" ***Do you think he still hates me for leaving him to the Ilyassai?" demands Katisa.***

She had not worn the traditional dress of the dakamatapa and, for Pomphis, she looked more like a young Ilyassai than the wife of a emperor.

" ***No," replied Pomphis.***

He looked thoughtfully at Katisa, whose age was only apparent in her eyes.

" ***But there's still hatred in him," she whispered.***

“ ***He needs it. It is his main weapon against his opponent. But if he survives this battle, his hatred will be dangerous for everyone, including him.***

" ***Then you have to help him lose his hatred," Katisa said.***

“ ***I will,” Pomphis swore.***

7

REVENGE IS MORE IMPORTANT

The kandisa armada was sailing at a brisk pace towards Mlongo. The Kitwana coast was in sight, but there was no sign of the Naama invaders.

A little earlier, when the armada passed the sheer cliffs that separated Kitwana from the neighboring kingdom of Mpemba, a furious gust had suddenly begun to blow from the south. Even worse than the ***dhorubas,*** the wet-season storms that put an end to all shipping for as long as they lasted, downpours had slammed into many ships, threatening to sink them.

No one doubted that the winds had been conjured by the Erriten.

Panic gripped the sailors who clung where they could to the rocking ships. They tried desperately not to be swept away and thrown into the waves. Suddenly a golden sphere shone from the deck of the flagship.

- The kandisa! cried the soldiers and the crew.

Their fear ebbed immediately. As the sphere seemed to hang high above the fleet, its brightness increased to such an extent that the men were forced to shade their eyes. Heat accompanied the spell of the kandisa. But it was the gentle warmth of a sunrise and not the infernal inferno suggested by the luminous intensity of the sphere.

The glare gained in power, contrary to the storm which calmed down little by little until becoming a light shower. Then the rain stopped completely, and the soldiers were able to look up at a completely azure sky. The sphere of the kandisa descended again on the bridge of the ***Khaiyah.*** Then it seemed to go out suddenly, like a flame suddenly extinguished.

A mighty ovation rose from the ships of the Five Kingdoms. The hearts of soldiers and sailors vibrated with confidence. The ***tawa*** of the

kandisa had defeated the ***mchawi*** of the Erriten. It was a good omen for the coming battle. But none had seen the kandisa sprawled and panting on a bed in her cabin. Rakhma and her other advisors were standing around her, their faces showing concern.

"This was just a diversion," the kandisa had said in a strained voice. The Erriten try to empty me of my ***tawa*** before we get to Mlongo. But we will not let it go. ***I won't let them!*** Now that the spiers and towers of Mlongo were slowly coming into view, the lookouts saw that the docks were filled with oddly shaped black ships. The oblong hulls seemed to be resting on the water. Their decks were filled to the brim with soldiers whose scaled armor reflected the sun like lightning.

No masts could be seen on the Naama ships. Not a single oar protruded from their sides. No boarding spurs at their bows. The ships were motionless, the soldiers massed on the decks totally silent.

"Do they intend to fight without moving?" Rakhma wondered aloud.

"We'll see," replied the kandisa. For now, we're sticking to our original battle plan. Give the orders, Rakhma.

The lion-masked commander bowed. Then he began to bark his instructions to the messengers aboard the ***Khaiyah.*** Soon horns were blaring a special code, relaying information from ship to ship.
Slowly the armada moved into position, blocking access to the bay. The Negus of Axum's fleet advanced to cross the river, the other route to Mlongo.

Perched high on the ***Khaiyah's mast,*** a lookout watched the progress of the Axum fleet. Although the covenant was signed, he – and many of the Cushites with him – did not really trust the negus.
At the first sign of betrayal, he had to issue a warning.

Despite all the movements of the fleet, the ships of the Naama remained strangely still.

In the building that once served as Majnun's palace, five Erriten sat beneath the emerald spheres. Their faces in no way reflected their true age: the youngest of them had already seen more than three hundred rains. Their skin was the color of dark amber, and their hair

grew in spiral tufts, which left parts of the skull completely devoid of hair. Their lips were split into vertical crevices, and their dark, almond-shaped eyes gazed in deep fascination at the power that emanated from the spheres and bathed them in green, malevolent light.

Ordinarily, the Erriten would have concealed their oversized bodies under loose iridescent cloaks. But there, as they stored away their ***mchawi,*** they were naked, revealing the extent of the price they had had to pay for their allegiance to the God-Demons.

Only their arms still looked like human arms, and even those had grown longer and looked more like sticks than anything else.

Their legs were two columns of flesh, thick, evoking the legs of elephants or hippopotamuses. Their torso was a puffy mass of strange fabric covered in finger-long tentacles. These tentacles writhed, animated by a life of their own. They glowed with an inner fire, absorbing the pure ***mchawi emitted*** by the spheres.

To have the power of the Mashataan in their hands, the Erriten had agreed to see their bodies transformed and take forms similar to those of the Mashataan themselves. For hundreds of rains, wizards had been planning and plotting for the time when they could shift the balance between their masters and the Cloud Striders. Now that tipping point was near…

There were only two obstacles left standing in the way of triumph: the kandisa and Imaro. Soon, the two would be eliminated.

Soon…

The Erriten's tentacles stiffened with the concentrated ***mchawi .***

Closing their eyes, their arms rising above their heads, the Naama sang syllables that no human throat was supposed to utter. The empty chamber that once held Majnun's throne suddenly vanished in a burst of emerald fire as the Erriten's incantation reached its climax.

— ***Now!*** cried five voices in perfect unison.

And it happened.

On the deck of the Axumite flagship, a Hakut Ras member named Ras Tesfa walked away from the negus in horror, his face contorted in disbelief.

“Please, O Negus,” he pleaded, his voice shaking. You can't do this!

Other members of the Hakut Ras viewed Tesfa with sympathy.
But most agreed with the words their monarch had just spoken, and they glared at their companion.

"We've allied ourselves with the Cush," Tesfa said. We must remain loyal to this alliance, or the Naama will crush us all. Don't you remember the visions the kandisa showed us?

The negus looked at the Ras casually. In his mind, an insidious voice repeated: ***What is most important to you? Honor or revenge?***

He had heard that voice for the first time in the throne room, after the kandisa had left her palace to return to her army, which had invaded the Cush. The kandisa had persuaded him to join the coalition against the Naama. Yet the Cushites had invaded Axum almost without firing a shot, and the negus had been seething with humiliation since the armada had begun its journey south.

"Alamak the Moon and Atun the Sun cannot shine in the same sky," the negus said to Tesfa.

He was repeating a proverb that had long served to define what differentiated the Cush and the Axum. In his mind, this difference could not be ignored, not even in the face of the threat posed by the Naama. ***What is most important to you? Honor or revenge?***

“Will you do as I instruct… or not?” asked the negus,
looking at Tesfa without an ounce of mercy.

Tesfa drew himself up to his full height, which was equal to that of the negus. A gust of wind swept across the bridge, ruffling the lion hair that decorated the nobleman's armour.

"I won't obey it," Tesfa said.

The negus drew his sword. The grating of steel on the leather of the scabbard rose to a crescendo. He took two steps and plunged the tip of his blade into Tesfa's stomach. The ruler may have been old, but his arm was still strong. The steel pierced the cuirass and sank into the noble's intestines. Eyes bulging with pain, Ras Tesfa groaned horribly. Then he collapsed on the deck. A pool of blood

formed under his body as he writhed in his final spasms, before coming to a complete stop.

Raising his reddened blade, the negus turned to face the assembly of Hakut Ras.

"Are there others to disobey me?" he asked.

Not one moved or spoke.

The negus had been on the throne of Axum for over thirty rains. For his subjects, obeying his wishes was as natural as breathing. Satisfied that none of the other nobles wished to die like Tesfa, the negus lowered his blade.

"Return to your ships and do as I told you," he ordered.
scrutinizing them with as much cruelty as a hawk.

“Revenge is more important,” he whispered as the Hakut Ras parted.

"The Axumites are turning back!" shouted the lookout atop the ***Khaiyah's mast.***

His message reverberated throughout the armada when the other lookouts confirmed the information. The Axumite fleet moved away from the mouth of the river and advanced towards the Cushite ships, which occupied the center of the battle formation. As the negus' ships approached, sparks of flame appeared at their prows.

Seconds later, head-sized balls of fire were catapulted from the Axumite ships. As the projectiles slammed into the decks and hulls, tongues of flame shot out.
One of the projectiles landed on a Cushite sail, transforming it in a few seconds into a flaming sheet which fell on the deck of the ship.
Transformed into living torches, sailors jumped screaming into the sea, where they were swallowed up by the tumultuous waves.

"Damn Axumites!" Rakhma snapped from the flagship. I knew we should never have trusted them! Launch the response!
Tell the other ships to stay in formation!

Beneath his lion mask, Rakhma's amber eyes shone with an ardor as intense as the flames that streaked the sky. He whirled around, irritated, as one of his officers tugged at his sleeve to get his attention.

"What is the kandisa going to do?" asked the man, whose black face was plagued by worry.

Rakhma glanced at the door of the kandisa cabin. It was closed. Earlier, she seemed to have fully recovered from her efforts to dissipate the storm stirred up by the Erriten. But it had been a day and a night since she had appeared on the deck of the ***Khaiyah.***

"It's not up to us to anticipate Ha-Nala's will," Rakhma replied curtly, using the formal title of kandisa. Now let's give those Axumite traitors the fate they deserve. And keep an eye out for those naama ships. They don't sit there doing nothing by chance.

Horns roared, relaying orders from ship to ship. Incandescent tinder-based missiles blasted out from the prows of the Cushite ships, carving streaks of flame through the air and crossing the Axumite fireballs. Fires broke out on the decks of the Negus' ships, but his fleet continued to advance. The other ships of the coalition were motionless, plunged into the most total confusion. The betrayal of the Axumites was incomprehensible... Didn't the negus then understand the consequences of a Naama victory?

And meanwhile, the black ships stood motionless...

Just as the Cushites began to neutralize the advance of the Erriten, the Inhuman allies of the latter joined the battle.

The ***Unthlatu*** were a race of serpent-men inhabiting a desert south of the Abamba Mountains. There were thousands of rains from that, in the dark days, their Ophidian race had been sired by the Mashataan. The Gods-Demons then reigned supreme over the Nyumbani. The arrival of the Cloud Striders had put an end to the undisputed ascendancy of the Mashataan, who had been unable to quench their thirst for revenge since that time…until today.

Like the serpents from which they were descended, the ***unthlatu*** swam underwater, and the surface did not wrinkle to betray their presence. Thousands of serpent-men had taken advantage of the confusion created by the defection of the Axumites to slip under the ships of the invaders. Now they climbed the sides of the ships and threw themselves on the decks. The fighters of the four kingdoms recoiled in dismay upon seeing them.

Unthlatu were ***human*** in appearance, but their bodies were covered in tiny scales, the patterns and colors of which varied from individual to individual. Their scaly skin reflected the sunlight. With the exception of the harnesses in which their weapons, swords,

axes and daggers, they were naked. They were already seizing these weapons and brandishing them in front of the sailors. However, it was their faces that most disconcerted their opponents. Devoid of hair and hair, covered with scales, the features of the snake-men remained human except for their eyes whose vertical pupil was reduced to a slit, and the sharp fangs which one saw when they opened the mouth, and from the tip of which dripped venom… The bite of an ***unthlatu*** was as deadly as that of a cobra.

Like a wave of scales and steel, the ***unthlatu*** attacked. Moving with undulating grace, they brought down their weapons with blinding speed. As soon as they were near their victims, they threw their heads forward and sank their fangs into the exposed parts of flesh of their opponents. Their poison took effect immediately, and their victims writhed in excruciating pain before succumbing.

Despite the horrific nature of their assailants, the allies quickly recovered from the initial shock. While they couldn't move as quickly as their opponents, their shields and armor offered better protection than the scales of the ***unthlatu.*** The snakemen's skin was hard, but steel could bite into it...when it found its target. The speed at which the ***unthlatu*** moved compensated for their lack of armor.

The vanguard of the armada was quickly plunged into utter chaos. As the ***Unthlatu*** rose steadily from the sea in increasing numbers, the Axumite offensive continued. Ships caught fire and sank. The cries of the dying broke through the crash of weapons and the roar of flames.

Meanwhile, the Naama's ships had stood motionless, moored at captured docks in Kitwana. The faces of the soldiers waiting on the various ships were calm. They looked like Erriten, though they looked a lot less repulsive. Protected by scale armor of some unidentifiable animal, they were armed with serrated swords and spears resembling harpoons. They seemed far too few to oppose with any effectiveness the thousands of men who made up the forces of the kandisa.

And the ***unthlatu*** would not be enough to tip the scales of the battle.

Each naama ship also included a man who stayed away from the others and did not wear military uniform. These men were all standing

stern, the sea winds blowing their iridescent capes. They were the Erriten's acolytes. Their capes were used to mask the first mutations of their bodies. Although they were not yet able to wield the ***mchawi*** as well as their mentors, they were effective conduits for the power the Erriten were about to unleash...

The acolytes sang a song that echoed in the wind. A sound like the hissing of a thousand white-hot rocks thrown into the sea suddenly drowned out the clamor of the fighting.
Lines of green energy began to glow from the black hulls of the ships, which then set in motion.

The ships suddenly propelled themselves through the waters as if being pulled by giants on the threads of green energy. With breathtaking speed they swooped down on the armada, cutting through the path of the Axumite ships and raising great plumes of foam as they went. As they touched the fleet of the kandisa, the acolytes changed their song. The ***mchawi*** that emanated from the ebony ships intensified. Emerald beams of light shot out from the ships. Thicker than a thigh, the rays hit the hull of the ships of the Cushite formation, breaking them with a resounding crash.
The Cushite ships swayed under the impact, as if tossed about by the waves of a ***dhoruba.*** Unable to maintain their balance, many sailors fell overboard. Some fell directly on the green beams. Their screams broke cleanly as their bodies were pulverized upon coming into contact with the green beam.

Sailors and warriors jumped from their doomed ships, swimming in the harbor like so many fish pursued by underwater predators. Those who got too close to the naama ships were skewered by the long harpoons of the scale-armored soldiers. Beneath the surface, ***unthlatu lured*** poor devils to their doom.

On the deck of his flagship, the negus admired, ecstatic, the damage inflicted on the ships of the kandisa by the ***mchawi*** of the Naama. The emerald beams deliberately avoided the Axumite ships. The suffocating heat of the ***mchawi*** blew like a warm breeze on the beard of the negus when the rays were about to crash on the Cushite ships.

As his men gazed at the sight of death with expressions ranging from satisfaction to terror, the negus was suddenly assaulted.

by doubt. ***Will the Naama turn against me once they are done with the Cushites?*** he wondered uncomfortably. Then he burst out laughing. His soldiers and nobles looked at him, and apprehension could be seen on their faces. But the negus was too absorbed in his own thoughts to notice. ***If they turn against me, it won't matter,*** he thought. ***The Cushites will still be annihilated. Revenge is more important…*** He burst out laughing again. The timbre of this laugh frightened those who were near him much more than the cries of the dying and the ophidian whistles of the ***mchawi.***

In their barracks, the Erriten exulted while remaining focused on the waves of ***mchawi*** that they circulated through their acolytes. The waves of terror and confusion that emanated from the Cushites and their allies were like pleasant rain to them, who savored the chaos they had produced.

The kandisa is too weak to stop us, they told each other mentally. ***We won !***

The emerald beams hadn't hit the ***Khaiyah yet,*** but it was only a matter of time. The harbor had become a graveyard for once formidable warships. The fireballs launched by the armada's catapults rarely managed to hit the ships of the Naama which were particularly fast and, when they did, they bounced harmlessly off the ships' hulls, which were made of metal. The Azanian warships had already begun to retreat. Soon the contingents from Punt and Engaruku would do the same, leaving the Cushite fleet alone to face the Naama and Axumites, as the Cushites bore the brunt of the attack. The losses were numerous and the damage substantial. Rakhma looked at the door of the kandisa cabin. His thoughts were the same as those of all the survivors of the armada. ***When will she take action?*** But the cabin remained hopelessly closed.

Napata was the capital of the Cush. The Sakkhar, a mixture of palace and mausoleum, dug into the side of a mountain, was the heart of the capital of the kingdom. And in the heart of the Sakkhar was an austere, square-shaped room, furnished only with blocks of granite serving as seats. One of these blocks was in the center of the room. It was in this place that the kandisa had come

commune with his ancestors, whose remains were preserved in niches carved into the walls outside the hall.

A maiden of ten rains sat on the stone of the kandisa. She was dressed in a simple white dress that covered her from neck to ankles.
His eyes were large and golden, shining like torches in the middle of his ebony face. Her name was Nefkha, and she was both the kandisa's daughter and heiress.

And when her ancestors whispered to her the progress of the campaign against the Naama, Nefkha wept. Because she was certain that she would have to take her mother's place on the throne far too soon...

8.

THE NONGKWAZE BASIN

"Udali!" Solosha swore as he saw the creatures facing them.

It was not common for Solosha to invoke the name of the God-Ancestor of the Ngwika.

A pack of hyenas surrounded the two warriors. Their shrill laughter was a cacophony. The hill country hyenas were different from their spotted cousins, whom Imaro had encountered on the Tamburure. They were smaller, with a shaggy, grayish coat streaked with black vertical stripes. A crest of hair ran from their necks to their tails. Like all hyenas, they had formidable jaws, capable of crushing the thickest bones.

There were dozens of them around the warriors. In a country where carrion was everywhere, predators grew bolder. The hyenas watched them without batting an eyelid, as if sizing up the two men. The last light of day reflected in their eyes.

“Too many, ***izizalwana,” Solosha*** whispered. They will have the advantage in the darkness. If their jaws close on
we…

"Have you ever seen hyenas behave like that?" Imaro asked calmly. Why don't they jump on us? Why do they stay there, like a pack of dogs, doing nothing? It's ***mchawi,*** Solosha… and yet my bracelets mean nothing to me.

The largest of the hyenas put one paw forward and the bracelets sent a powerful jolt through Imaro's limbs. He had once compared the sensation to the vibrations one perceives when one hand is placed on the ground. This time it was much more like a violent lightning bolt.
And the shock was even stronger when the hyena began to speak.

The animal's mouth and throat moved and contracted as if to bark. But the warriors did not hear the words. the

message came straight to their minds.

The one you are looking for sends us to guide you to him. Follow us, and we'll escort you. Refuse, and we will feast on your leftovers

"So make a feast of that!" Solosha cried, brandishing his spear, still regretting not having brought a shield after all.

"Wait," Imaro said.

Solosha turned and saw that Imaro hadn't drawn his sword.

- Most…

"If she wants to drive us to Bohu, let her do it," Imaro interrupted.

"Have you gone mad?" said Bohu. It's a trap !

- Nope. Bohu wants me as much as I want him. He simply does so that we can settle our accounts more easily.

He stretched his fists towards the hyena. When she saw the bracelets on which the last light of day was reflected, she recoiled fearfully, and a terrified yelp escaped her throat.

"You're not going to betray us, are you, Fisi?" Imaro asked, using the term ilyassai designating the hyena.

The animal did not respond with words. Quietly, he took the lead of the pack and climbed back up the slope from which they had emerged. Stopping near a boulder, the hyena tilted her head, inviting Imaro and Solosha to follow her.

"Animals only speak in fairy tales," said the latter. And I've told a lot of the tales, myself. No one will believe this one, if I survive long enough to get the chance to tell the tale. After you, ***izizalwana.***

Imaro nodded and started to climb the hill, making sure beforehand that all the hyenas were ahead of him. Fighting against the fear that threatened to eat away at her courage, Solosha followed suit. They were soon out of sight of their camp, as the hyenas led them in a macabre procession through the darkened hills.

By the time the warriors reached the hill where the Wankuza Pool was, night had long since fallen. They had arrived in the vicinity of the great ***kraal*** of the Tsubi. It was at this place that the

cattle slaughter. This land was once lush and well cultivated. Now it looked like Mahali-ya-Kiu, the Land of Thirst.

The warriors had seen the inhabitants of the great ***kraal.*** There was no reason for Imaro and Solosha to conceal their presence. The Tsubi who had remained behind during the ***mfecane*** were little more than living ghosts, so skeletal that they cast almost no shadow in the moonlight. Either they were motionless outside their homes, or they moved with ethereal slowness, busy with tasks that existed only in their minds. They didn't seem to notice the hyenas and the two warriors, the latter two advancing cautiously, avoiding the countless piles of bones that littered the place. Clouds of ash rose behind them as they crossed the charred fields.

They didn't say a word when they reached the hill where Nongkwaze had received his visions. Several hyenas then intervened, and the one who had spoken to them broke the silence.

Only the one called Imaro can climb this hill...

Imaro nodded.

"No," cried Solosha. Bohu would he let you join him so easily if he hadn't already set his trap, ***izizalwana ?***

Imaro did not answer. He had patiently nurtured his hatred, let it smolder throughout this journey. Now it was time to unleash it. Her bracelets gleamed and vibrated to the rhythm of her heartbeat. Never had the vibrations been so strong. But this particular sensation did not distract him. He was fully and totally focused on his hatred.

In Cush, the city guard had believed that it was he who had killed his wife and son. They had set the lions on him, and the lions were dead. Now Bohu had to die...

Solosha ceased to exist for Imaro. He didn't even hear her protests as he started up the hill. Imaro was soon no more than a shadow moving between the pools of darkness of the rocks, then he reappeared a little further.

Solosha wanted to rush after him, but the bare fangs of the hyenas prevented him. The young Ngwika resigned himself. He knew it was impossible for him to force his way through without ending up between their jaws. ***If Imaro dies…*** he thought, with a feeling of unease. If Mkwayo's s

was to perish on the top of the hill, so he would carry off as many hyenas as he could into death before he too succumbed.

"Udali be with you, ***izizalwana,*** " Solosha whispered as Imaro disappeared into the darkness from the top of the hill.

Once on the crest of the hill, Imaro examined the basin that carved the upper part of the hill like the footprints of a giant. He saw the Wankuza pool, where the terrible Tsubi hallucinations had started. The moon and stars were reflected on the flat water.

A large rock was near the shore. Bohu sat there. His silhouette absorbed the little light emitted by the moon. It looked like a gaping hole torn from the factory of reality. Bohu had no reaction as the warrior approached him. Imaro soon saw what the Naama was holding in his lap.

It was Nongkwaze. His eyes, sunken deep in the hollow sockets of his skull, were no more than two slits. With each heartbeat, a small bump appeared and disappeared on the thin, taut skin of his chest. She was extremely thin and her life was no more than a simple spark, which only the ***mchawi*** of Bohu prevented from extinguishing completely.

"You see," said Bohu to the young girl. Imaro came to us, as well as I predicted it. Aren't you happy to see him?

Nongkwaze said nothing. She could barely breathe.

“Looks like she's no more impressed than that, Imaro.

Bohu stood up, still stroking Nongkwaze in his arms. He placed it with exaggerated care on the stone slab. The girl's limbs were stiff as those of a statue. A dozen steps now separated the two men. Imaro saw that Bohu was about the same height as him. His figure was almost indistinguishable in the dark, but we guessed that his musculature was also comparable to that of Imaro.

"We meet at last," Bohu said, speaking in the Ngwika language, which he spoke better than Imaro.

Imaro said nothing. His instincts were screaming at him to throw himself on the Naama and chop it with his sword. But he had faced the ***mchawi*** far too many times in the past, and he had learned to temper his ardor with caution.

Let him show you what's in his scabbard. Let your grow
hate even more. You have before you the one who killed Tanisha and Kilewo…

"You are the one my masters fear, even if they refuse to admit it, even to themselves," Bohu went on. You are the uncertain element of the camp of the Cushites and the Cloud Striders. And I have the same function for Naama and Mashataan. We are really alike, you and me.

Imaro's restraint had just reached its limit.

"Similar?" Imaro growled. Am I a killer of women and children?
Have I caused an entire tribe to starve? Am I waging war on innocent people?

Bohu burst out laughing. A laugh that was reminiscent of sneers
hyenas below.

- You know how to speak ? he scoffed. I was starting to wonder if you...

Imaro drew his sword. He had forged it himself at Cush, while learning to work iron. It was with this same weapon that Bohu had massacred his family. The moment it returned to his hands, Imaro had sworn he would kill Bohu with it.

"Do you know how to fight as well as you talk?" he shouted, gun in hand.

Raising his right hand, Bohu uttered a word of power. An emerald-colored tongue of flame shoots from his palm. Its brilliance was such that Imaro mechanically shielded his eyes. When he looked back at Bohu, a gleaming green sword throbbed in the wizard's hand.

"I could have killed you dozens of times before you reached that
hill, announced Bohu. And I'm ready to face you… if necessary.

"What makes you think it won't be necessary?"

- Look at me.

The darkness that enveloped Bohu had dissolved. Like Imaro, the sorcerer wore only the leather loincloth of an Abamba warrior. Like Imaro, the giant's muscles rippled beneath his skin. There the similarities ended.

Bohu's face was unlike anything Imaro had known.
The hair, a simple cap of spiral hair, and his full, cracked lips reminded him of the Erriten he had killed in the city of Mwenni. The flat nose and the large cheekbones, on the other hand, were typically Abamba. In the light from her shining sword, the

Bohu's skin seemed slightly lighter than Imaro's. It remained, however, dark enough to belong to the Abamba.

"I am of mixed blood, Imaro, just like you. My father was a Naama. He was an acolyte of the Erriten, whose Change had not yet begun. My mother was an Abamba slave. Such unions between masters and slaves are forbidden in Naama. The parents and the child are systematically put to death…

Just as I would have been among the Ilyassai if my mother hadn't saved them from Chitendu, Imaro remembered.

"But I was brought up for a purpose.

Me too.

"I'll tell you a secret, Imaro. Did you know that the Erriten hate their transformations? Did you know they hate the way their bodies have to change if they want to wield the ***mchawi?*** Oh, they say it's not important, it brings them closer to their masters, the Mashataan. They claim to be beyond human feelings and desires now. But they lie. I am living proof of this lie.

Bohu looked at Imaro for a long time before continuing.

"To become an Erriten, a Naama must be in tune with the Mashataan. This harmony inevitably leads to Change, as soon as the ***mchawi*** has been used sufficiently and regularly. Only the Mizungu from beyond the sea could use ***mchawi*** without undergoing the Change. But their secret disappeared with them. A long time ago, Chibenguela, First of the Erriten, convinced himself that a half-breed, half-abamba, half-naama, would be able to use the ***mchawi*** without undergoing the Change. For dozens of rains, the other Erriten refused to consider what they called Chibenguela's "outlandish idea," because the Naama abhor the very idea of mating with the Abamba. For them, the Abamba are cattle, whose destiny and function is to serve as slaves. And so it was, until the day the Erriten heard of your birth, Imaro.

The Cloud Strider, Imaro thought. ***My other father. He's in me but I can't find it...***

"It was because they were afraid of you that the Erriten finally gave in to the idea of Chibenguela. It was he who selected the acolyte and the Abamba for the union of which I was the fruit. Shortly before I was born, the Erriten put the acolyte to death. And once I was raised, my mother

abamba was sent back to her native tribe, the Mtatwa. Before being captured by the Naama, she had given birth to a first son, named Shingane. The Great Elephant is my brother, even if he does not know this fact.

Chibenguela's hypothesis turned out to be correct. I, the half-blood, drank from the ***mchawi*** as much as any Erriten. And yet, I have not undergone any transformation, because I am not totally naama.
I'm still human though. I enjoy the pleasures that are denied to the Erriten. They hate me for it and made me suffer every second of my existence.

Bohu flexed his muscles, which protruded as if they had been buried under his skin. Imaro's muscles were just as strong, but possessed a harmony that Bohu's lacked.

"The Erriten were determined that my physical strength would rival yours," the wizard said. I was forced to lift blocks of stone that were a little heavier each day. When I failed, I was chastised. I learned not only to wield the ***mchawi,*** but also to use the weapons of a warrior. And there again when I was not up to it, I was punished.
Does that remind you of anything, Imaro?

Scenes from the past loomed in the warrior's mind. The ***mafundishu-ya muran ;*** the rigorous training he had undergone during his childhood among the Ilyassai… The beatings, the mockery, the handles of spears on his head… The treason…

Almost imperceptibly, Imaro lowered his weapon. Bohu's words echoed in him. He rebelled against this feeling.

"Why tell me that?"

“Because I don't want to fight you, Imaro. I want you to join me, let us make an alliance...against the Erriten.

The tip of Imaro's weapon sank lower still. Nothing Bohu could have said could have surprised him to this extent. He pulled himself together and straightened his weapon; his rage took over. He took a step forward.

"If so, why did you kill my wife and son?"

Bohu raised his free hand, fingers spread. small arcs of light emerald connected the ends of his fingers.

- Please ... Let me finish, he said softly.

Imaro stared at him. He couldn't deny the affinity he felt for the character, despite himself. He needed to hear the end of what Bohu had to say to him. But he did not sheath his sword.

“You and I are tools in the service of others, Imaro.
We only exist to be used and then discarded when we become useless. If the Erriten prevail over the kandisa, I know the fate that will be mine...despite all the promises made to me since my childhood. They will kill me, because I am who they aspire to be. Their jealousy will make them kill me.

"And you think the kandisa will get rid of me?" Imaro asked.
Bohu burst out laughing.

"Do you really think she cares about your fate?" If so, why did she allow me to enter your home in Meroe? How do you think someone like me, dripping with ***mchawi,*** could have entered and left the Cush so easily… if the kandisa hadn't allowed it?

Imaro didn't answer, but he lowered the tip of his weapon.

“All your sufferings have been calculated, Imaro. Like mine.
You and I were launched on parallel paths which now have just joined. The end of our journey is supposed to be here… now. And this end is your death… and mine. But it is not said that things must necessarily happen this way!

The flames that raced along Bohu's fashioned sword suddenly burst forth, and the wizard's eyes blazed with fervor as he continued.

"Go back to Amanyani, Imaro," urged Bohu. Convince your father to ally with Shingane. Together, they will be able to ransack the lands that surround the Naama. They can destroy the places where ***irimu,*** unthlatu , ***izingogo*** and other creatures are spawned that you don't even dare to dream of. The forces of the kandisa will distract the Erriten. The ***mchawi*** of the latter will be diminished. Then, ***together,*** we can annihilate them. ***Together,*** we will be a power before which even the kandisa and her allies will have to bow. She won't dare to get rid of you anymore. As the monomatapa's heir, the latter's empire will be yours. By my side, however, you could rule all of Nyumbani. Once the Erriten are defeated and the kandisa put back in its place, who could stand in our way? Join me, Imaro. Join me and become more than just a weapon wielded by others.

"How could I ally myself with the man who killed my wife and my son?" repeated the warrior.

Bohu's face twisted in frustration. The luminous radiance of his blade of fire grew brighter.

'But Imaro,' he cried. So you don't understand? Tanisha and Kilewo are still alive!

Mwazwenyi's cry echoed through the monomatapa's apartments. Straightening up suddenly, she grabbed the blanket and brought it to her throat. Mkwayo reacted immediately by wrapping his arms around his shaking body. With a gesture, he chased away the guards who had come running when he heard his cry.

Mkwayo whispered a few words in her ear to soothe her. It was her turn to share the monomatapa's bed, even though Katisa had this privilege more often than other wives. She hadn't made love to her husband since Imaro's arrival; they were content to sleep together, not touching with palpable tension. Now, as he tried to figure out what was troubling Mwazwenyi, Mkwayo sensed that he was worried about her, an emotion he had thought was long gone.

But she couldn't tell him about the memory that had invaded her dreams...the memory of what had happened to Peyisai in the mhondoro temple. ***She didn't tell him, because she was afraid.***

9.

THE TURNING POINT OF THE BATTLE

In her cabin on the ***Khaiyah,*** the kandisa was engaged in a fight as intense as that raging in the port of Mlongo. The battle was going on…in his soul. ***Strike now! Now ! The people who trusted you are dying! To die !***

- No, it's too early. I must not empty myself of my ***tawa.*** This is only the first phase of the conflict. After this battle, there will be another, in Naama itself...

Your forces cannot prevail without your intervention! They are already panicking! You have to help them! Right away !

"Too soon, too soon. Lives will be lost in this battle, it is inevitable. I know it. I must push the Erriten to use more ***mchawi*** still. I must muster my strength while they waste theirs...

You must knock! You must!

The kandisa remained motionless on her couch. The hatches of his cabin were closed; she was surrounded by darkness. His eyes were closed and his hands crossed over his chest. But the nerves and muscles bulged on his hands, revealing the ongoing inner war.

Beneath his lion mask, Rakhma's face was dripping with sweat as he tried to coordinate an orderly retreat. Exchanging instructions at the top of his voice with the lookout, the commander formulated his strategy. The ***Khaiyah*** had not yet been attacked by ***unthlatu*** or black warships; the emanations of the kandisa's ***tawa*** kept the Erriten and their instruments at bay.

Why doesn't she do more? Rakhma wondered, unable to suppress the resentment that was rising within him.

Even so, Rakhma was a loyal soldier. For any Cushite, the kandisa was an almost divine figure. For him, she had been more than that, before

she accedes to the throne.

She must have a reason for letting so many people perish, he thought. The commander drove these speculations from his mind and began to issue orders that were relayed by the roar of horns that split the din of battle. And when the signals echoed, the armada began its retreat.

Unthlatu ***still*** swarmed on the decks of ships that had not been sunk by the ***mchawi. Kill the serpent-men,*** the Cushite horns had roared. ***Throw them back into the sea. Let not one remain on our boats...***

Like madmen, the sailors threw themselves on the ***unthlatu.*** The latter had long since lost the advantage of surprise. The Cushites had quickly learned to avoid their fangs and use their shields as weapons of attack. Although the ***unthlatu*** continued to cause damage, their losses were now greater than those of their opponents.

The Axumites continued to fight on the side of the Naama, as in the wars of ancient times. Balls of fire arced across the sky, and as the ships made contact, soldiers leapt from deck to deck and clashed with fearsome ferocity. The Cushites had the upper hand, enraged by the Axumites' betrayal. Most of these fought with as much ferocity as their opponents, but a number seemed hesitant, reluctant to carry out their negus' orders.

The dominant factor in the confrontation remained the Naama fleet. Their black ships sliced through the waters of the harbor like gigantic insects, propelled by the lines of ***mchawi.*** Writhing from their hulls, the emerald cylinders decimated the armada like so many demonic tentacles. The Naamas kept a respectable distance from the ever-increasing number of enemy ships giving band.

For Rakhma, this distance was an advantage, making the retreat easier. In the wake of the coalition fleet floated countless corpses and wreckage of ships. All those who could still think had only one thought in mind: ***Where is the kandisa?***

The cabin door swung open, slamming against the woodwork. A golden light filtered through the entrance. The kandisa went out on deck. His body was barely visible in the luminous glow that surrounded him, competing

with that of the sun. Even so, Rakhma was certain he saw her eyes… Two glowing dots that pierced the halo of light that enveloped the kandisa like a garment… Eyes that dipped directly into his before the glow turned into an opaque sphere that rose in the sky.

A cry of joy rose from the crew of the ***Khaiyah.*** But it was a cry that lacked enthusiasm, reflecting the thoughts of all who had survived the Naama onslaught.

Why did she take so long to come to our aid!
Is it too late?

In their fortress of Mlongo, the Erriten knew immediately that the kandisa had just entered the battle. Their tendrils stiffened in anticipation. The light in their spheres began to throb, like a heart beating faster with excitement.

We have drained his strength, some exclaimed. ***She is ours! The battle is won!***

Be careful, another calmed him. ***Its strength is not nothing.***

We are stronger. What can she do?

We don't know. Therefore, we must strike with all the power we have. And we must strike now.

Now ! nodded the others.

The Erriten siphoned off more ***mchawi*** than they had ever dared. The walls of Majnun's throne trembled under this pressure. The windows of the palace were bathed in emerald light. The Erriten devoted all their power to annihilating the kandisa.

From the prows of their ships, the Erriten acolytes stared at the golden sphere above them. Then, obeying the brutal orders of their masters, they diverted the ***mchawi*** from the armada. The green tentacles rose in spirals towards the sphere of the kandisa. Some collided with it, others wrapped around it, as with ships. The golden glow disappeared, enveloped in an evil emerald cloud. The men of the kandisa fell into despair as quickly as they had rejoiced. Suddenly, everyone looked away under the effect of a flash of rare intensity. The green tentacles snapped apart and fell like severed limbs, the fragments dissipating as they hit the water.

Spears of saffron light shot from the sphere, shattering the last cylinders. A crackle that sounded like grass catching fire in the dry season accompanied the destruction of the ***mchawi manifestation.*** More yellow beams fell on the energy lines that towed the black ships. The lines disappeared and the ships came to a halt. As the acolytes struggled to maintain control of their masters' ***mchawi ,*** the soldiers of the armada let out cries of jubilation. Drunk with revenge, they were going to wipe out the humiliation suffered; a revenge that would help their dead companions reunite with their ancestors.
But an order issued from the bridge of the ***Khaiyah*** prevented them from unleashing their fury. The message warned them: ***The kandisa is not finished yet...***

The captains of the armada kept their ships motionless. The ***unthlatu*** were gone, having abandoned the battle as soon as they saw the sphere. They swam as quickly as possible towards the docks. Only the Axumites continued the fight, and they were giving way under the onslaught of the Cushites. The other members of the coalition remained where they were, as they had been ordered. After what they had just seen, the allies began to fear the kandisa as much as the Erriten...

On the naama ships, the acolytes sent frantic signals to the Erriten. In vain. Soldiers in scaled armor watched nervously at the sphere and the armada. Bodies floated along the black hulls, some dead, some not. The Naama soldiers didn't care. They only cared about their own lives.

The naama officers shouted angrily at the acolytes, who ignored them. When the water began to boil, the soldiers understood what the acolytes already knew... Screaming at their demonic gods, the Naama began to jump overboard. They knew their armor would drag them down, still hoping to save their skins. But it was too late.

Whirlpools quickly formed under the keels, spinning the ships around like toys. Screams of agony turned to gurgles as the sailors were sucked into a downpour. The sea sang a song of death, engulfing Erriten ships and troops. When the gigantic waterholes closed, the men of the coalition were flabbergasted.

The sea became calm and placid again.

There was no longer any trace of the black ships.

Fear gripped the negus as he saw the kandisa sphere lift from the ***Khaiyah.*** However, he still relied on the power of the Erriten to defeat her. He knew his own ships had rammed a spear into the armada's back. Undoubtedly, the forces of the allies would soon disperse...

Then the negus saw the kandisa playing the ***mchawi*** of the Erriten. And he felt his flagship begin to spin uncontrollably. He understood that she intended to annihilate him at the same time as the Naama.

Mouth twisted into a grin of terror, his face a greyish mask, the negus turned abruptly on his heels as he heard footsteps behind him. Ras Tedesi, one of the most servile of the Hakut Ras, stood before him. While trying to keep his balance, Ras Tedesi unsheathed his sword. His eye shone with a murderous gleam as he advanced towards the negus.

"You sold our honor for ***that!"*** yelled Tedesi, his voice overwhelming the cries of despair of the crewmen.

Before the negus could unsheath his turn, Tedesi plunged his blade into his throat. The negus' eyes widened and blood spurted down the front of his armor. Then he tipped back over the rail and fell into the maelstrom that roared beneath the ship.

As the ship sank, Ras Tedesi stared at the blood that dripped from his blade, the blood of his king. Then he turned the weapon on himself and let himself fall. The hilt hit the bridge and he impaled himself on his own sword to the hilt.

The Erriten hastily covered their unsightly bodies with their large black cloaks before heading for the exit of the throne room. Their spheres still hovered above them as they clumsily moved towards the door. The ***mchawi*** contained within the spheres was little more than a faint, barely discernable green glow. Fear was clearly visible on their features, even if they would have refused to label the feeling as such.

“She is alone… How can a single being contain so many power, without the price being death? asked an Erriten.

They were talking out loud now, not telepathically. They needed to save what little ***mchawi*** they had left.

“Only the Cloud Striders could answer that question for you,” another replied. Do you want to ask them?

"We're wasting time and energy with this discussion," a third snapped. We must leave this miserable town, and our forces with it. The kandisa has not yet used all of her ***tawa.***

The Erriten were concentrating as they left the palace. Their orders were imprinted violently in the minds of their creatures, and they were carried out immediately.

The Naama soldiers who were not on board the ships retreated behind the walls of Mlongo. Abamba warriors with blank eyes followed the soldiers. The ***irimu*** growled angrily when told to back off, and reluctantly obeyed. The Erriten had promised much to the ***irimu*** in exchange for their help, and the sea lions were bound in return by their oath.

Groups ***of izingogo*** moved cautiously through the deserted streets of the city. Unthlatu ***who*** had escaped the whirlwinds were the last to leave. No Kitwanians joined them, as there were none left in town. Many inhabitants of Mlongo had died at the start of the Naama invasion and the survivors had learned that they were only so much prey for the Naama and their Inhuman allies. Those who had survived their abuses had fled. What was left of Mlongo's once teeming population now lived a precarious existence in the hinterland with the rural dwellers…and they waited.

With what was left of their ***mchawi,*** the Erriten worked out a final incantation, then, in turn, they left Mlongo. Inside her ***tawa sphere,*** the

kandisa panted, breathing with difficulty. She was sweating profusely. Senses far sharper than sight and hearing told her with absolute precision what was going on beneath her. Despite all her power, she could only focus on one task at a time. When the whirlpools had finished engulfing the naama ships, she had subtly altered her relationship with the spirits of the sea. A deep groove had appeared in the water, stretching to the harbor and separating the ships of the armada of the now empty area that the Naama fleet had occupied.

The waters suddenly rose to form a gigantic wave, which for a few moments remained suspended in the air, like a liquid mountain.

momentarily obscuring the heavens. Then the wave began to break and fell on Mlongo, destroying the city in a monstrous crash.

On the other side of the furrow, the ships of the armada, which should have been swept away by such a tidal wave, remained intact and motionless, held in place by a force more powerful than the wave conjured up by the kandisa.

The ground swell swept the quays. Walls of water high as two men roared through the streets of the city. The houses and shops were drowned, as well as the palace. Only the walls overhanging the interior of the grounds resisted the pressure. Even so, water spilled over the ramparts, turning the tracts of land below into swamp. Then the magic wave slowly flowed back to the port, leaving a salty trail in its wake.

In the sphere, the kandisa carefully ended her harmony with the sea. She probed the palace with her hidden senses. Before raising the groundswell, she had seen the Naama forces retreating but the Erriten had inexplicably remained in the palace. She had therefore sought to annihilate them with the waterspout before they could flee. Now the kandisa realized she had been fooled. The Erriten had indeed fled the city with their creatures, leaving only simulacra behind them. She had spent a good part of her ***tawa*** for nothing.

"I'm a fool," she whispered, almost sobbing. They escaped me.

In great silence, the soldiers and sailors of the armada watched the wave flowing back towards the quay. No ship moved, not even those of the Axumites, surrounded by the Cushite ships.

Rakhma was the only one to notice that the sphere of the kandisa was less luminous. When it began to descend from the sky, its color changed from golden to yellow, then turned to ivory. Its opacity disappeared in passing. Now everyone aboard the ***Khaiyah*** could see the silhouette of the kandisa. Shouts of fear and concern rose from the ship. But Rakhma kept her calm. He stood just below the kandisa as it fell, all trace of the sphere now gone.

At the last moment, the kandisa called on what was left of her ***tawa*** to cushion her fall into Rakhma's arms. The commander blurted out

a low growl, but managed to keep his balance. The kandisa seemed to weigh nothing at all, as if it had become immaterial.

Rakhma concealed the naked body of the young woman from the eyes of the spectators. As he carried her to his cabin, she looked at him with haggard eyes. And she spoke to him so softly that he could only hear her by pressing his ear to her mouth.

— The Erriten are still alive… On the plain, in front of Mlongo…
We must… destroy them.

And destroy you at the same time? Rakhma asked silently as she put the kandisa on her bed in her cabin.

A long column was coming from the east, past the border towns of Mapungubwe, towards bure, ***the barren country that separated Maguvurunde from Kitwana. At the head of the column, alongside the*** mtekwa ***mapungubwe in charge of the expedition, was Majnun. The exiled king was clad head to toe in Amanyani armor, a gift from the monomatapa. His eyes shone with anticipation as he thought of his impending revenge. He was certain that the Naama would not be able to resist the onslaught of the army which was coming from behind him, and even more so if the siege of the kandisa turned out to be a success.***

Rabir was at his side. During his stay in Mji-Amanyani, the two men had become friends. Rabir was ready to fight for the kingdom of Majnun... and to see the sea again...

Pomphis was not with them. At the last moment, he had decided on a whim that his place was with the army that was heading south, to Naama, contrary to what the kandisa had decreed. He had pretended that Imaro still needed him.

The column plunged into the homespun, ***unaware that the battle had already been fought.***

10.
MAGICIAN AND WARRIOR

"Still alive?" Imaro asked, in an emotionless voice. You lie… I saw their corpses.

"How do you know it was really your wife and son?" he asked God.

- I saw them…

Slashed, decapitated, covered in blood, impossible to recognize... Bohu couldn't tell the truth. It was unimaginable. Unless… ?

“Illusions, Imaro. The Cushites buried illusions.

"If they're alive, then where are they now?"

— Au Naama.

- Why did you do it ?

"It was you my masters sent me to kill, at Cush, not Kilewo and Tanisha, answered Bohu calmly.

Imaro stared at him, his lips curling into a fierce grin.

“When the Erriten learned that I had disobeyed them, they punished me severely. But I convinced them that my plan was better than theirs. They could get more results if your wife and son were held hostage. Even today, the Erriten believe that I am using your family as a means to force you to turn against the kandisa. But now you know my true intentions.

"Why did you make me believe they were dead?" Imaro asked.

“To test you. To find out if you were worthy to be by my side. To now, I know it is.

"How do I know you're not lying?"

Bohu pointed to the pool with a gesture. The warrior moved cautiously towards the bank. As he looked at the water, he saw shapes there. These shapes stirred and quickly became two faces Imaro hadn't seen for more than a rain: Kilewo and Tanisha. They

were sitting in a small room with no furniture. Their faces betrayed their despair.

The image became clearer. Imaro saw them distinctly now. He felt as if he could snatch them from their captivity just by stretching out his arm. As if reading the warrior's thoughts, Bohu made the vision disappear.

"Come to me, Imaro," he said in a low, suave voice. Join me and together we will overthrow the Erriten. Your wife and child will be free. You will rule over an empire much larger than your father's. Your son will inherit all the Nyumbani...

He's lying, Imaro thought.

Imaro had dealt with masters of illusion before. Isikukumadevu, the Creature of the Black Hills, had summoned specters from Imaro's past. They looked real, but weren't. Other wizards had done the same. And there again it had only been a question of illusions.

He lies…

But if not?

For months, Imaro had fought an inner battle to come to terms with the deaths of Tanisha and Kilewo. They had died because he hadn't protected them… His guilt had been, at times, unbearable. The pain had only recently begun to subside. His wife and son were dead. He wouldn't bring them back to life. He could, on the other hand, avenge them.

And now the one who had killed them was claiming that they were alive...

He lies…

But if not?

Imaro didn't believe Bohu. He didn't want to believe it.

— ***Liar!*** he yelled.

Turning away from the pool, he brandished his sword and leapt towards the Naama. A leopard couldn't have attacked with more speed. But his blade only met the void. Bohu had disappeared. For a few seconds, he remained disoriented, bewildered. Then his bracelets warned him. He threw himself aside just as Bohu reappeared. The wizard's flame sword sliced through the air where Imaro had been a second before.

"Have you ever wondered how I could be in so many places at once?" scoffed Bohu. I can transport myself wherever I want

a wink. I can be at Naama one moment, and here the next.
Even the Erriten cannot. It's just me!

"Then why didn't you use it to escape the punishments they inflicted on you?" Imaro asked.

Holding his two-handed sword firmly, Imaro was ready to renew his assault. He was wary of the wizard's next move, however.

"To prove to them that I am stronger!" cried Bohu.

His mask of impassiveness was cracking. Bohu's flaming sword slammed into Imaro, whose blade rose to meet her. At the last moment Imaro ducked and watched the green flame arcing beside him.

Again his bracelets had warned him: if his blade and that of Bohu touched, it would be a disaster.

He circled around his opponent, watching him, looking for the opening, the opportunity to plunge his blade into his body without touching the flaming blade. Bohu kept wearing boots and his blade drew trails of fire in the air.

If Imaro didn't possess the gift of vanishing at will, he was still a difficult target to hit. Because he was more than human. The Cloud Strider in him was taking over. Thanks to the warnings provided by the bracelets, he was able to anticipate Bohu's movements and dodge.

The duel was done in silence; the time for words had passed. Their feet rubbed the ground so lightly that they made no sound.
Nongkwaze, still perched on the rock near the basin, was the only witness to this duel between the weapon of the Mashataan and that of the Cloud Walkers.

Imaro saw Bohu sway, leaving an open space between his waist and his ribcage. The warrior refrained from attacking. ***A trap,*** he thought immediately.

Opening his free hand, Bohu threw half a dozen balls of green flame towards his opponent. Quick as lightning, the warrior dodged the missiles that seemed to char the ground the moment they hit. But was this really the case? ***Illusions,*** Imaro thought. ***Like the images of Tanisha and Kilewo…***

A flame as luminous as the radiance of the sun suddenly springs up between Imaro and Bohu. Blinded, Imaro looked away in sheer reflex. During the second he was thus exposed, Bohu's blade touched the warrior's.

A mchawi-based flame enveloped ***Imaro*** 's sword and radiated into his hand. Suppressing a cry of pain, the Ilyassai dropped his weapon. He tried to pull away from the killing blow he expected to receive. But who did not come. Instead, Bohu let his sword fade into wisps of green light. Then he reached out to Imaro, grabbed him by the wrist, and straightened him up easily.

"Your own terms, Imaro," the Naama said. I will defeat you according to your own terms...

Surrounding Imaro with all his strength, Bohu began to push the warrior back in an attempt to break his spine. Imaro brushed the last haze of blindness from his eyes. Searing pain shot through his body as Bohu increased his pressure even more. He had never been confronted with such physical power. Even Mkwayo's paled in comparison.

But Bohu was more than human. Like Imaro...

Bohu had made the mistake of leaving the Ilyassai's arms free. Imaro tied his hands around his foe's bull neck, and he squeezed the blood vessels. Slowly, he forced Bohu to raise his head. The Naama's eyes widened and the two opponents stared at each other.

Bohu tightened more and more and the pain became like a spear. But Imaro had learned all about pain during his years with the Ilyassai.
His hands crushed Bohu's throat even more forcefully. Suddenly, the pressure on his spine began to ease. Bohu no longer held his gaze. The Naama's eyes moved from right to left, revealing an unprecedented emotion: despair.

A different pain invaded Imaro's back. The ***mchawi,*** which was burning in the palms of Bohu's hands.

"On my terms?" roared Imaro, his fury at the wizard's duplicity taking precedence over his desire to scream his suffering. These are my conditions!

He released Bohu's neck, put his hands under his chin and pushed up with all the strength he could, expecting to hear the spine crack.

Instead, Bohu disappeared.

Imaro fell to the ground, landing heavily on his hands and knees.
The pain he felt in his lower back made him suffer abominably.
It was as if Bohu's flame had burned part of his skin.

His bracelets tingled. A warning. He rolled aside just as Bohu reappeared, the emerald flame once again in his hand. The blade slammed into him, charring the ground where he had been a second before.

"My terms now!" cried Bohu.

The wizard disappeared. Imaro jumped to his feet. He desperately searched for his sword. But the light from Mwesu and the stars was dim; he did not see her. Her bracelets warned her. He threw himself aside, once again dodging the blade which drew a green trail in front of his chest.

A deadly dance ensued, Bohu appearing and disappearing like a star in the sky, while Imaro dodged the sword strikes and searched for his own weapon. He was close to exhaustion and the burns on his back made him suffer excruciatingly with every movement.

He knew that Bohu must be starting to get tired too, even if he had no idea of the exhaustion caused by his repeated appearances and disappearances. Dodging a slash of the blade, Imaro's heel hit something. He stumbled, narrowly avoiding the flaming blade.
Unbalanced, he tried to straighten up before Bohu struck again.
In the brief flash that accompanied the latter's disappearance, he saw what had nearly brought him down: his sword.

The second his hand closed around the handle, his bracelets tingled. Bohu looms before him, his sword describing an arc of flame.
Acting faster than ever, Imaro kicked, hitting Bohu's arm and distracting his opponent.

Imaro knocked just as the wizard began to disappear. The blade ripped open the Naama's entrails. Imaro released his sword to strike again, but Bohu was already gone. Grabbing the handle with both hands, he waited for the bracelets to tell him where his enemy was about to appear. Imaro curled up, ready to pounce on his opponent.

The wizard reappeared several paces away from Imaro, well beyond the reach of his sword. The flaming sword was gone. Bohu's face was twisted in pain. He held his stomach firmly with one arm. Blood flowed from the wound Imaro had inflicted on him. The Naama, however, remained standing. His free hand was outstretched, palm up. A circle of emerald-colored light formed on it.

"Do you think you can handle the pain, Imaro?" Bohu asked.

Each word seemed to have cost him more energy than he could allow. His face was contorted from his efforts to concentrate.

“Learn what my masters do to punish me,” he gritted. And if you survive it, know that ***you*** are responsible for what happens to Tanisha and Kilewo. ***You,*** not me!

Imaro reached back, determined to throw his sword at Bohu like a spear. As fast as it was, it wasn't enough to rival the speed with which an emerald light shot out of Bohu's hand. ***Mchawi*** 's web did not hit Imaro. She enveloped him, as though woven by a gigantic spider.

Greenish filaments immobilized Imaro, and an excruciating pain, much worse than that of the burns, invaded him. His sword slipped from his hands; his body twisted and bent like a tree under the gust. It was as if dozens of hands were tearing him apart from the inside.

Bohu didn't take his eyes off Imaro, himself doubled over in pain. He used what was left of his ***mchawi*** to hold the web that was torturing Imaro. He finally heard the sound he had been waiting for. The howl of pain that finally left Imaro's lips. It was like the cry of a lion, or a bull, which had never before been forced to confess its state of weakness...

Then the last echoes of Imaro's cry faded away. Bohu closed his hand. The web disappeared. Imaro slumped to the ground, as if his bones had melted. Bohu stiffened. He removed his arm from the wound on his stomach. The wound was no longer bleeding. Tiny wisps of smoke billowed from the cauterized flesh. Bohu's face was frozen in a sinister mask of satisfaction when he addressed Imaro.

“The Erriten have done this to me more times than I can remember. But not once did I scream.

The wizard wrapped his body in the cloak of darkness. During for a few moments, a green halo surrounded his silhouette. Then he disappeared.

Nongkwaze sat silently on her rock. His eye sockets were empty. To save his life, Bohu had taken all the ***mchawi*** that he had spread in the territory of the Tsubi into him. The ***mchawi*** was all that kept the hungry Tsubi alive…including Nongkwaze. And the moment the ***mchawi*** was gone, Nongkwaze, like all of her people, was dead.

As for Imaro...

Seething with frustration, Solosha stayed at the bottom of the hill during the duel. From time to time, the Ngwika saw flashes of green flashing at the top of the black eminence. More than once he had tried to climb to Imaro's rescue. Each time, the hyenas had bared their fangs to dissuade him.

He stayed where he was, reluctantly. His spear and his speed would have allowed him to overcome one or two beasts. But then the others would have had no trouble knocking him down. The animal that led the pack spoke no more. But Solosha was sure he detected a gleam of mockery deep in the hyena's eyes...

Then he had heard Imaro's cry. Even though he had only known him for a few weeks, he knew what it had taken to snatch such a cry from the warrior's throat.

Solosha looked at the hyenas. They began to behave more like real hyenas than like animals under the influence of Bohu's ***mchawi .*** They kept fidgeting nervously. The gleam of intelligence had vanished from their eyes. Solosha wasted no time thinking. He plunged his spear into the eye of the nearest one, jerked his weapon free, jumped aside, and smacked another in the skull. Stunned, the animal collapsed and two of its congeners jumped on it and sank their fangs into its flesh. Maddening growls, yelps and snickers filled the air as the hyenas pounced on each other or fled. Without the ***mchawi,*** the natural took over.

Solosha didn't wonder where this good fortune came from. He skirted the hyenas and ran up the hill. The silence that emanated from the top contrasted mournfully with the infernal cacophony below.

Across Tsubi territory, people were finally dying their long-delayed deaths. Skeletons covered in skin sagged. Emaciated bodies lay next to animal carcasses in charred fields. The homes of the Tsubi became their tombs. In the seconds before death, the veil of illusion that Bohu's ***mchawi*** had provided disappeared. The foul revelation of what they had experienced accompanied the victims on the dark path of their ancestors, where the souls of the dead go to seek comfort.

But there would be no rest or comfort for the souls of the Tsubi... for they would not be allowed to join their ancestors.

Arriving at the top of the hill, Solosha looked desperately for Imaro. At first, the faint glow of the night sky revealed only the slack waters of Wankuza Basin to him. Then he saw the charred bits of land, and finally the motionless form of Imaro.

A low moan escaped his throat as he rushed towards the warrior.

He must be alive, he pleaded silently, leaning beside the warrior.

It wasn't just Imaro's importance in the conflict between them and the Naama that explained Solosha's concern. Imaro was more than a member of his family. He was a friend. He and Solosha had shared many secrets during their journey to Tsubi country. Solosha understood that a part of him would disappear if Imaro were to die.

He put a hand on the warrior's chest. Her heart was pounding…slightly. He was breathing, but this breathing was weak.

Solosha knew he needed a healer. He couldn't do anything. He tilted his head and pounded his thigh with his fists in his impotent rage. Then he jumped to his feet. He was sure he heard a noise. Something was climbing the hill.

The hyenas...

He gripped his spear tightly with both hands, then opened his mouth wide. tall, surprised to see who approached him.

The warriors of most of the western tribes of the Abamba Highlands gathered in the Ngwika country. Old alliances were strengthened; enmities, even older, were buried under soothing words and cups of utywala. ***News of the Tsubi's attack had spread across the hills, and the even greater threat posed by the*** impis ***of Shingane was on everyone's lips, with reports arriving from the east daily.***

The relative ease with which the Tsubi had been defeated did not give the Ngwika a false sense of security. They knew the Mtatwa were a far worse threat. Sullen faces greeted the many tales of Shingane atrocities.

Nkwana was in charge of gathering forces. But his mind was not focused on the various tasks that required

the organization and stewardship of such a vast army. His thoughts were constantly on the fate of Solosha and Imaro.

11.

THE PRICE

Solosha sat up. He gripped his spear tightly. The two approaching figures were those of women, skeletal and almost naked, belonging to the Tsubi. ***What have I to fear from them?*** he wondered, but didn't lower his spear.

— Get up! t-il launcher.

The women stopped. The taller one made a gesture that Solosha recognized as a spell. Before he could react, a mist formed between him and them, and the figures became indistinct, as if glimpsed through a sudden fog.

A moment later, the mist lifted. Solosha shook his head to clear his sight, as the women standing before him were no longer Tsubi. They were Ngwika. He recognized the smaller one. Namevula. As for the biggest...

Solosha invoked the protection of his ancestors. He had never had much contact with the ***umuti*** who lived in the caverns of the rippled hills. But this one he knew. Bengeshe.

"What…" Solosha began.

... do we do here? Bengeshe finished, in a gravelly voice, barely louder than a whisper.

Nomvula passed Solosha and knelt beside Imaro. She leaned her head on the warrior's chest and put her arms around his shoulders. Then she looked at Bengeshe.

“His heartbeat… They're so weak,” she said in a quavering voice, ready to cry. ***The umuti*** brushed Solosha's spear and crouched beside Imaro. Illuminated thus by the spectral glow of the moon, she was the very embodiment of superstitious fear. The moon revealed the rags that had been used for his Tsubi disguise. She also revealed the two parallel scars that hollowed out her chest.

When she found out she would be an ***umuti,*** Bengeshe had gone to meet an old witch who had initiated her into the forbidden arts. During the final ritual, ***the umuti*** had cut off Bengeshe's breasts. Male ***umuti ,*** Solosha had heard, were emasculated in a similar ritual, meant to symbolize the abandonment of their former lives and the impossibility of going back.

Solosha looked away as Bengeshe ran her hands over Imaro's body. A sudden thought came to him. He reached out to grab Bengeshe by the shoulder, but changed his mind.

"You made ***the icantu*** for Nomvula," he said.

Bengeshe nodded.

“And you,” he said, turning to Nomvula, “knew there would be a price to pay.

"Yeah," she agreed.

She held Imaro's limp hand as Bengeshe continued to explore the aftermath of Imaro's final assault.

“And you followed us,” Solosha muttered. With those…disguises, you looked like those undead that roam the area.

Bengeshe sat up. Solosha took a step back, then cursed herself for doing so.

“He lives,” said ***the umuti, “*** but he's broken inside. His bones were shattered. I could heal him, but that would take too long and he is needed now.

She turned to Nomvula, who had remained kneeling, still hugging Imaro.

"Are you ready to pay your price?" asked Bengeshe.

Nomvula nodded. Solosha suddenly understood and her hand went to unceremoniously on Nomvula's bare shoulder.

- You can not do that ! he cried.

"I have to," she said quietly, pulling away from him.

“The only way to restore this warrior's integrity is to transfer his wounds into someone else's body,” Bengeshe said, relentlessly. Nomvula must be that other person. This is the price of ***the icantu…*** Imaro is essential for the defeat of the Naamas.

- Nope ! Solosha exclaimed, her face betraying her dismay. What you go do go kill her. Let me take his place.

"You are brave in a stupid way, like all of your blood," said Bengeshe. Like this one, and like his father before him.

She gestured at Imaro, who remained motionless, then looked at Solosha. He wanted to look away, but couldn't tear himself away from Bengeshe's eyes.

"We need you too, son of Nkwana," she said. The Ngwika will realize that the ***impis*** of Shingane are much more difficult to defeat than the Tsubi. You will have a role to play in this battle.

Solosha considered the umuti's words . He knew she was telling the truth, a truth he did not want to accept. He turned to Nomvula.

“You will die if you do,” he told her.

“I know,” she replied, her voice barely audible.

"Why give your life this way?"

For a long moment, Nomvula remained silent.

"For the same reason you're willing to lose yours," she finally answered.

She looked at Bengeshe, then back to Solosha.

" ***The umuti*** didn't force me," she said. But she showed me what would happen if I didn't…for me, for you, for all of us. What I saw is why I do it.

"No other reason?"

- None.

Nomvula looked down. Solosha didn't believe her, but Bengeshe cut short on conversation.

"Time is running out," she said. Whoever did this is gone and the Tsubi are all dead. To accomplish what he needs to accomplish, Imaro must be whole again, and now. Nomvula's body will take Imaro's wounds, but her spirit will rejoin her ancestors, who will sing her praises in honor of her courage. She will only feel Imaro's pain for a few moments. The time it will take for his spirit to leave his body.

She looked at Nomvula.

"Are you ready, my child?" she asked.

"Yes," replied the young girl.

Solosha turned to Bengeshe. His eyes were hard, and he held her gaze.

“You knew this was going to happen, didn't you? he asked.

"The spirits in the bones told me what to do," said Bengeshe. Now it's time for you to go.

"Let me go?"

"To the foot of the hill." This is not a show for you.

- Why ?

Solosha's tone was imperious. The ***umuti*** were outcasts, while he was the son of an ***nkosi.*** He had never cared about his status before. But now he was reluctant to follow Bengeshe's instructions.

She didn't take her eyes off him until her anger slowly dissipated.

"I advise you to keep your word about the pain," he said darkly.

Bengeshe said nothing. Solosha turned and started to walk down the hill. Then he remembered what might await him there.

"Were the hyenas still there when you arrived?" he asked.

'Yes,' replied Bengeshe, 'but they are gone now.

She offered no further explanation. Solosha disappeared behind the crest of the hill. Bengeshe then began preparations for his task, and that of Nomvula.

Nongkwaze's sunken, dead eyes never left her.

At the foot of the hill, Solosha came upon the carcasses of four hyenas, half devoured. No trace of the other scavengers. He wondered what Bengeshe had done to drive them away. Many ideas came to his mind. None were pleasant.

Before he could ask himself any more questions, Nomvula let out a cry too. brief than acute. Then the silence fell.

Solosha had heard the cries of men wounded in battle. He had heard the cries of a hunter eaten alive by a hill lion. And he had one day heard the shrill screams of a woman during a difficult childbirth where he could not be present, being ***ma-conini*** to attend a childbirth among the Ngwika.

But he had never heard such pain as the cry uttered by Nomvula when his spirit had fled his body after absorbing Imaro's wounds. In order to distract his attention, he looked at the distant dwellings of the Tsubi. He saw no signs of life, not even the parodies of activity he and Imaro had witnessed hours earlier.

Solosha waited, but he heard nothing more. He slowly climbed the hill. He didn't know what to expect the first time. There, it was different.

Nomvula lay motionless, her body disjointed and twisted. Moonlight glinted off his glassy, bulging eyes. His mouth was open in a silent cry.

Imaro was lying in the same spot. Her eyelids fluttered, but her eyes remained closed. His chest heaved and sank violently, as if just breathing was a new experience. The muscles of his gigantic carcass rolled unconsciously under his skin, freed from the paralysis that had kept them immobile.

Bengeshe was sitting, curled up on herself, in a state of utter exhaustion. His eyes were closed, like Imaro's. A film of perspiration glinted off her almost naked body, reflecting the brilliance of the moonbeams. Remnants of the magical power she had used to the end, which was neither ***tawa*** nor ***mchawi,*** but something older and more elemental, crackled through the air like lightning bolts of heat.

Solosha was above the other three. There was resignation in his eyes, but no acceptance.

"You spared him as much pain as possible?" he asked Bengeshe.

The latter nodded.

“You knew all of this was going to happen, didn't you? asked Solosha, in a bitter tone. You knew that as soon as you gave him ***the icantu.***

The umuti opened his eyes and looked at Solosha. There was a weariness in her eyes that she would never fully recover from, as long as her life lasted, because it was a weariness of the soul.

- Yes ... I knew it, she admitted.

Solosha brandishes her spear. If he killed her, no one would know. He lowered his weapon the moment he heard Imaro's groans coming back to him.

The warrior's eyes were open, and his head turned towards Nomvula. Even in the darkness, he recognized her face. And he also recognized death, for he had seen it far too often.

— Nomvula, murmura-t-il.

He was still weak. He could barely muster enough strength to lean on one elbow. But he was unharmed again. Even the burns in

his back was gone.

He touched Nomvula's arm. The flesh was stiff and cold. Imaro felt that something was wrong under the skin of the young woman. And then he understood why she was dead. He looked up and saw Solosha, spear in hand. Then his gaze fell on Bengeshe.

- Who is this ?

“Her name is Bengeshe,” Solosha replied flatly. She's an ***umuti,*** a witch. She used Nomvula to save your life, passing your wounds through the girl's body. I asked her to use my body, but she refused. Nomvula had to die in order for you to live. That was the price of his ***icantu.*** That's the price she paid for one night with you.

Imaro dropped to the ground. His whole body quivered in what was almost, but not quite, a sob.

“Again,” he blurted out. ***Still…***

Keteke. Tanisha. And now Nomvula. All of them had died because they loved him. They were all dead because he let them love him.

But Bohu had said that Tanisha was not dead...

He lied !

What if it wasn't?

The rosy filaments of dawn threaded their way through the half-light darkness. At Wankuza Basin, Nongkwaze's skeletal corpse was where Bohu had left it. Bengeshe and Solosha still sat near Nomvula's twisted body.

Imaro had slept apart. As the night wore on, his body had stored up all the strength it had lost. No one had said a word after he fell silent. He stood up. His muscles responded immediately. Not the slightest trace of weakness or pain. But he remembered...

He remembered the excruciating pain Bohu's web had caused him. As if his muscles were torn from his bones, and his bones from their joints. He remembered his feeling of helplessness when Bohu had disappeared. He remembered the cry of pain he couldn't suppress.

And the rain…

He looked at the body of the young woman who had died for him, because of him. In the first light of morning, this distorted face and these limbs

stiffened in an unnatural position was a silent accusation. He was unable to look at her any further.

He looked at Bengeshe, noting his dry body and the scars on his chest. He then looked at Solosha, whose face went through several successive emotions, but where regret dominated. Imaro indicated to Solosha that he wanted to speak to him without Bengeshe being able to hear the conversation. Solosha followed Imaro several paces from ***the umuti.***

“Imaro,” he began. I said some things last night...

"What you thought," said Imaro. You were telling the truth. Now listen to me.

He explained everything that had happened on the hill with Bohu, starting with the insinuations about the kandisa's duplicity, passing through the offer of alliance and ending with the duel which had opposed them.

"And you didn't believe him for your wife and your son?"

- I can not believe it.

Imaro shook his head, as if to chase the indecision and doubt from his mind. Solosha had more questions about Bohu's revelations, but he decided now was not the time to ask them.

- What will you do ? he just asked when Imaro was done.

— Bohu is still alive. I have to find him and kill him.

"After what he did to you?" Solosha asked, his eyes wide. It is only thanks to Bengeshe and Nomvula that you are still alive. If he uses his ***mchawi*** against you again...

“He couldn't do worse.

Imaro's eyes were relentless, like shards of obsidian.

Solosha understood that the Ilyassai had gained as much as lost during his confrontation with Bohu. There was a serenity in Imaro's attitudes that Solosha had never detected before. A certain composure...

This is what the warrior had won. ***But what have you lost, Imaro? What have you lost?***

“I'll come with you,” Solosha said.

“No, your people need you.

“ ***Our*** people,” Solosha corrected him.

“Perhaps,” Imaro agreed. Bohu talked a lot about Shingane. The Ngwika will need all their leaders to defeat him... including you.

If Bohu's trail leads me to the battle between the Ngwika and the

Mtatwa, I will be there. If not...well at least he won't be there to use his ***mchawi*** against our people.

Solosha looked at the furrows left by Bohu's fire sword in the ground. He knew that even the power of an ***umuti*** like Bengeshe was like a wisp of straw compared to the ***mchawi*** of Bohu.

And yet Imaro, who did not use sorcery, had injured the Naama and forced him to flee...

Solosha still blamed Imaro for Nomvula's death, but his respect for his ***izizalwana*** 's prowess had increased substantially. He wanted to continue to guide Imaro through the Highlands, but he also realized that the warrior's path would take him far beyond the territories Solosha knew well.

Yes… He would be much more useful to his father, Nkwana. The Ngwika army would need him to lead them east through the desolation the Tsubi depredations had caused.

"Do you know which direction you're going to go?" Solosha asked.

Imaro raised his arms and indicated the bracelets.

“The tingling is very slight now, but it's coming from the south. That's where I'm going.

The south, Solosha thought. ***The Lowlands. Forbidden territories, where prowl demons and naama slavers…***

'Imaro,' he said, 'remember this. Whatever happened… Whatever happened… Whatever words come out of our mouths with emotion, you are still ***izizalwana.*** You are one of us… An Ngwika.

The two warriors embraced. For a moment, Solosha thought he detected a flash of appreciation in Imaro's eyes. But he wasn't sure, and the moment was fleeting. They returned to Nomvula. Bengeshe was still kneeling next to the dead girl.

“Thank you for saving my life,” Imaro said.

The umuti looked at him for a long moment.

“Don't thank me, warrior,” she finally said. Thank her.

- How ? She can't hear me.

- Bury her. It will be enough.

Midday was long past when Solosha and Bengeshe descended the hill. In the past, Imaro would have been amused by Solosha's ill-disguised reluctance to be in the company of a

umuti. But the part of him that was sensitive to humor was gone, burned by Bohu's ***mchawi .***

When they said goodbye, Imaro was relieved that they were gone. He realized that he yearned for solitude with an intensity far greater than his need for human companionship. He looked at the two cairns erected on the graves dug with sword blows. One was large, the other small. Nongkwaze lay beneath the smaller, innocent child tricked by Bohu; she deserved to be able to reconcile with her ancestors.

The large cairn had Imaro's full attention.

“Nomvula,” he whispered. You should never have danced for me at ***the embizweni.*** You should never have aroused this ***icantu.*** I should never have gone to Galeka, he said. I never should have...

Live ? mocked a voice in his head.

Imaro understood then that Bohu was still in him, even if the Naama was far away.

Bohu was a prisoner in a place that only existed when he traveled using his mchawi.

His masters had witnessed his battle with Imaro. They had heard what he said to the Ilyassai. He had pretended to have lied, to have no intention of joining forces with Imaro to overthrow them. The Erriten thought he was lying to them.

They had seized him when he was weak, and had woven a diaphanous web of mchawi ***around him, imprisoning him in a glowing cocoon obscuring his counterfeit form. The*** mchawi filaments ***burned him far deeper than ordinary flames could have. And while the cocoon was closing around him, Bohu had burst out laughing in the face of his masters.***

"You still need me," ***he had taunted them.***

12.
THE NEXT BATTLE

Mlongo… A town whose inhabitants had long since fled; a city cleansed of the defilement of the Erriten. A city that the soldiers of the kandisa coalition had just occupied. A city besieged for the second time, this time by the Naama…

The ships of the alliance were the only ones in the port of Mlongo, where a lot of wrecks still floated. The allies had lost almost a third of their fleet, but the armada remained very powerful. The ships in reserve and the troop transports had fallen back from the naval battle and suffered no damage. Now they were anchored on the makeshift quays.

The Axumites had suffered the heaviest casualties. The few vessels to survive the engagement were surrounded by Cushite ships, whose catapults and boarding ladders were ready for action.
A single word from the kandisa and the Cushites would kill every last man of the negus.

But that word hadn't come yet...

The kandisa sat on the throne of Majnun, who had withstood the flood without anyone knowing how. Wrapped in her white dress, the kandisa seemed diminished, no longer having anything to do with the weak-willed character at the start of the campaign. Even so, her eyes were as sharp as an eagle's and her voice steady as she parleyed with the advisers of the other monarchs, with whom she was in violent disagreement.

"Ha-Nala, I can't understand how you can even suggest that those Axumite traitors be spared their lives," Rakhma said, his voice rumbling like thunder, beneath his mask. leonine.

The other monarchs nodded in agreement. The sha'a of Azania, a man who had seen more than eighty rains, leaned

on the ornate chair his servants had brought from his flagship.

"I agree with you, Commander," he said. Azanian ships are watching the river right now, a task we gave to the Axumites. I've lost too many ships and too many men to consider being lenient with them.

The object of the wrath of the sha'a, and others, stood before the monarchs, adamant. His name was Ras Amayehu, and he was the only Axumite in the room. Of all the members of the Hakut Ras who sailed with the negus, he was the only survivor. He was there to haggle over the lives of his compatriots. As he surveyed the faces of those who had gathered to judge him, he had little reason to believe he would succeed.

The kandisa's expression was unreadable. But Amayehu was certain that his thoughts were negative. The Cushites were those who had suffered the most from the betrayal of the negus.

The flight of the sha'a convinced Amayehu that he would have little sympathy to expect from the Azanians either. His gaze fell on the omal du Punt. Although the Puntians were of the same race as the Axumites, their kingdoms had rarely found each other on friendly terms.

More our fault than theirs, Amayehu thought bitterly. The omal's round, black eyes never blinked, as long as they rested on Amayehu. The Axumite could read neither sympathy nor condemnation.

Only the mbuli L'Engaruku showed a hint of sympathy for Amayehu. The Engaruku was a young man, who was out of place among these rulers. A black cape concealed her body. His face was a mask, in the center of which shone two inquisitive eyes. Like the kandisa, the mbuli was the embodiment of both regular and religious authority. The man seemed to have sympathy for Amayehu.

The latter struggled not to show his growing concern. He was quite young, although older than the mbuli. His breastplate was torn in several places. He had bandages on his arms and legs, although he hadn't received any serious injuries in the battle. He knew that his chances of being able to negotiate the lives of his men were more than slim.

Very well, then, he said inwardly. ***We may all die, but I'm not going to give you the satisfaction of seeing an Axumite humble himself by imploring you...***

— Can I speak for myself, or should I listen to more of these well-known speeches? Amayehu asked the kandisa.

“Silence, Axumite! Rakhma exclaimed. Be grateful that we have you allowed to live so long.

- Grateful ? repeated Amayehu. That's a word I wouldn't use, Cushite.

Rakhma's hand went to the hilt of his sword as a volley of curses echoed through the room. The voice of the kandisa interrupted the clamor.

"Let him talk," she said.

The noises died down. The other monarchs deferred to the kandisa. In silence, she waited to hear what Ras Amayehu was going to say.

“All my life,” he began, “I have believed in these things: that the Axumites are the people of Alamak, the moon; that the Cushites are the people of Atun, the sun; that Alamak and Atun cannot shine in the same sky; and finally, that I must obey the negus in everything. When my negus told me that Alamak and Atun should shine in the same sky during the war against the Naama, and that we should fight on the same side as the Cushites, I obeyed him. When he said we had to go back on our word and hit the Cushites, I obeyed him. If my negus had asked me to kill myself by impaling myself on my own sword, I would have obeyed him.

He locked his eyes on Rakhma's face.

— If your kandisa had ordered you to attack our ships, would you have obeyed him? ? he asked.

Rakhma considered the question for a moment before answering.

"Yes, with joy," he said.

"And if you had lost this battle and found yourself in front of me, as I am in front of you right now, would you expect us to show you mercy?"

— Non.

"Then why are you wasting your time in this discussion?" Kill me and the others, and be done with it, if that's your intention. But remember, we didn't do anything that you wouldn't have done “with joy”.

Again Rakhma's hand dipped to the hilt of his sword, and again the kandisa intervened.

'Ras Amayehu,' she said calmly. Do you approve of the orders your negus gave?

Amayehu let out a sigh of regret. He looked down before answer the kandisa's question.

'No,' he said. It was a betrayal. I was on the flagship when the negus gave the order. Ras Tesfa opposed it. The negus killed him. No one else had the courage to oppose him. I know I didn't get it...

“Did the Negus appear to be…himself when he ordered you to attack us? asked the kandisa.

“No,” Amayehu said, remembering the terrifying events. It was as if another man had taken on his skin. But he was still the negus. We had to obey him.

"We understand that," said the kandisa. It is obvious that the Erriten have took control of the negus. And I never realized...

The kandisa went silent, deeply consumed by the pain of her failure. Then she spoke again.

"You and your people want to die with honor, is that it?" she asked, looking him straight in the eye.

- Yes.

"Who do you hate the most now?" The Cushites or the Naama?

"The Naamas!" replied Amayehu without any hesitation. Especially now that I know they corrupted the negus.

"Then you will have a chance to restore the honor of Axum," she said, ignoring the murmur of disapproval that rose from Rakhma and a few others.

Amayehu gave him a look that was half hope, half doubt.

"The Naama are out of town," she said. Other fights are announced, and this time without the intervention of witchcraft. It will be sword against sword, courage opposed to courage. And here's how you're going to be able to redeem the negus' betrayal...

On the plain beyond the walls of Mlongo, the five Erriten were gathered, far from the bulk of their troops. Their spheres remained dull. Their gigantic unsightly bodies were slumped against the tree trunks of the thicket where they had taken refuge.

"There is no way out," said one.

"The river and the wharf are blocked," another commented.

"We won't get any help from the south," said a third. Even if we managed to get back to the Upper City, only death would get us there.

would wait. Because we have failed to fulfill the mission that our masters had entrusted to us...

"What about the unchanged?" asked the fourth.

The others looked at him as if he had suggested the craziest of ideas.

"Your sphere would be shattered for even thinking that we could ask him for help," said the fifth.

The others agreed.

"Then we will die here," said the fourth, whom the negative response of his companions had not reached. The kandisa's sorcery is just as exhausted as ours. The numbers will make the difference in the next battle. And she has the advantage of numbers.

"Then let's summon as much force as we can," suggested the first Erriten, who had been leading the expedition. We still have a chance to win.

Putting an end to their argument, the Naama concentrated on the spheres suspended above their heads. The repulsive green glow began to shine brighter and brighter, without reaching the level of incandescence it had had in Majnun's palace. Their fate was sealed, but they could still drag their opponents down with them.

Naama's forces provided a formidable spectacle as they assembled on the muddy plain in front of the walls of Mlongo. The center was held by the Abamba, tall warriors with muscular bodies, equipped with their traditional weapons. Under Naama rule, the Abamba had long since lost their tribal identity. They had become a nameless people whose existence was only to fight and die for their masters.

The Naama troops were arranged on the flanks. The sun glinted off the scales of their armor and the tips of their spears. Some were infantry; others rode nimble little horses stolen from the Kitwanians.

Of the inhuman creatures that had decided to put their weight in the balance on the side of the Erriten, only the ***unthlatu*** had suffered heavy losses in the battle for the port. Dismissively throwing aside breastplates, the last serpent-men were lined up next to the Naama, who tolerated their presence more than did the Abamba.

The ***izingogo*** and ***irimu*** had kept all their equipment. The ***izingogo*** were human quadrupeds. Their arms were so long

that their legs and hands were kind of splay-toed paws, endowed with superhuman strength. A short, woolly coat covered the entire surface of their naked bodies. Except for their slightly undershot jaws, the faces of the ***izingogo*** were completely human, which was particularly disconcerting. But when they opened their mouths, you could see that their teeth were those of carnivores. They mingled with other fighters, divided into groups of about forty warriors.

The ***izingogo*** were much more comfortable with surprise attacks and ambushes than pitched battles. Sometimes they were just as troublesome to the troops they fought alongside as those they fought against.

Of all the elements composing the army of the Naama, the ***irimu*** were those whose physical aspect was the most formidable, and the ferocity to match. They were able to change their appearance, alternating between a human form and their true form: powerful, tawny-colored creatures with human hands and feet, but whose face, claws and strength were those of a lion. . They had adopted their leonine appearance for the time being, but were nevertheless armored and heavily ar

Hatred and intelligence shone in the ***irimu's slit pupils.***
The lion men held the ends of the front line. Their role was to push the enemy flanks towards the center.

The Cushites also had their non-human allies. In all of Nyumbani no one had ever surpassed the Cushites in the art of taming animals. Their war lions, which had traveled in the hold, were at the head of the column which was now leaving Mlongo to meet the Naama.

The lions and lionesses moved with a lithe gait, and the sun reflected on the gold decorations that adorned their leather harnesses.
No one was leading them into battle. Rigorous training had long since supplanted their carnivorous instincts.

Behind the lions came the heavy cavalry of the Cushites. The soldiers, steel-clad and equipped with long spears, rode ***gunkwu,*** animals that predate the arrival of men in Nyumbani. The ***gunkwu*** vaguely resembled rhinos, but larger and more massive, with a mass approaching that of a small elephant. Two horns, thick and parallel, projected from their forehead to beyond their nostrils.

These horns were rimmed with steel. Plates of armor protected the few vulnerable points of their bodies. The ground was still soggy, but the earth rumbled as they passed.

Companies of cavalry and infantry made up the rest of the Cushite army, but there were also contingents of troops from Azania, Punt and Engaruku, arranged on their flanks. A squadron of war elephants advanced heavily at the rear of the column.

Surviving soldiers from the Axum, there was not the slightest sign...

The battle began without any other form of ceremony, first opposing the ***irimu*** to the war lions. In the wilderness, the ***irimu*** possessed the magical ability to control their feline cousins. They used it on occasion to hurl hordes of lions at abamba ***kraals .*** They obviously tried to turn the Cushite animals against their masters. For a few moments, lions paused as the thoughts of the ***irimu raced*** through their minds: ***Turn around and kill the impostors… They are not of your kind… We are… Turn around and kill …Join us in freedom…***

But the lions of the Cush were different from their wild cousins as domestic cattle can be from wild buffalo. They were completely tamed. Few would have been able to survive in the wild. Instead of yielding to the invitation of the lion-men, they threw themselves on them. The two-legged and four-legged felines fought a fierce fight filled with roars, and the first blood of the battle flowed.

Meanwhile, the Cushites mounted on their ***gunkwu*** converged on the center of the line of the Naama. A wave ***of izingogo*** came to meet the attackers. Making full use of their speed and agility, the beastmen threw themselves between the thick legs of the ***gunkwu.***
They used the armor of the beasts as points of support to scale them and attack the Cushites. Several of these lurched from their saddles before crashing to the ground, where they were trampled by their own mounts.

But the number of horsemen thus unhorsed remained small. Many more were the ***izingogo*** who found death, impaled on the horns of animals. Unable to pierce the armor of the soldiers and their mounts, they were dozens to die under the animals, and their total number insufficient to slow down the charge of the ***gunkwu.***

Screaming their defiance in voices that never sounded human, the surviving ***izingogo*** returned to their positions. Some managed to get behind the ***gunkwu,*** but only managed to get skewered on the Cushite spears. The ***gunkwu*** were now approaching the Abamba, who were waiting for the moment of impact with the most total indifference. The shafts of their spears were planted in the ground, pointing towards the animals that charged them. Their shields were interlocked, forming a compact wall of hardened leather.
Against riders mounted on horses, the rampart formed by the Abamba would have been effective. Against a charge of ***gunkwu…***

The poles broke like wisps of straw and the shields were swept away. The ***gunkwu*** charge swept away everything in its path, trampling the Abamba like grass on the prairie. They did not try to flee; the witchcraft of the Naama had deprived them of the instinct of self-preservation.

The Naama soldiers were not bewitched. They retreated before this charge which reduced their allies to bloody mush. They had hoped that the Abamba would slow the Cushites long enough to launch an attack on their flanks, but that strategy had failed…Then the ***gunkwu*** split into two groups before converging again, crushing the rest of the Naama and their allies, caught in pincers.

The rest of the troops threw themselves into battle. The strength and speed of the ***unthlatu*** and ***izingogo clashed*** with the determination, discipline, and numerical superiority of the northerners. The Mlongo battlefield quickly turned into a whirlwind of weapons, fangs, claws, screams and death.

Before breaking ranks and giving in to the rout, the armies of Naama took a heavy toll. The ***unthlatu*** 's poisonous fangs sank into the flesh of their victims. The ***irimu*** killed several war lions and soldiers. The Naama were fighting fiercely, but their numbers were dwindling. Many died under the weapons of their adversaries, but some disappeared as if by magic. The allies realized that many of the naama soldiers had never existed, being only simulacra created by the ***mchawi*** of the Erriten.

And as that power waned, so too did the illusions.

When the Naama officers understood that there was nothing more to be expected from the Erriten, they ordered their forces to fall back in the only direction still open to them: the west, towards the ***bure.***

From the top of the war elephants, the horns ordered to stop chasing the Naama. Rakhma, who was overseeing the operations, knew that the Kitwanians were waiting for this moment to make the army pay that had invaded them and seized their town.

In the grove that served as their refuge, the Erriten used the meager ***mchawi*** resources still at their disposal to monitor the progress of the battle. They hoped for victory… but the conclusion was inevitable.

In their native land, the Erriten had a number of animals that would have been able to rub shoulders with the war lions and ***gunkwu*** of the Cushites. But the Erriten had believed that their ***mchawi*** would easily overcome the kandisa's ***tawa ,*** convinced that there was no real need to employ a large part of their military resources in the conquest of the kingdoms of the east coast.

Now the Erriten were discussing how they intended to die.
They had no way of escaping the troops that the kandisa was sure to send to capture them, because it was impossible for them to transport themselves like Bohu, the unchanged. Moreover, their ***mchawi*** was no longer strong enough to fend off war lions, ***gunkwu,*** or even just a troop of determined soldiers.

They had one last option. They could turn the meager supply of ***mchawi*** they had against themselves and thus end lives that had lasted nearly a thousand rains. They had lived through those rains as ambassadors of the Mashataan, the highest status one can achieve in Naama. And now their lives were about to end in ignominy, because they had misjudged the power and determination of the Cushite monarch...

Those who remained in the Upper City should continue the war now. Because there was now no doubt that the kandisa was going to launch its forces towards the south.

One last time, the five Erriten dropped their iridescent robes and exposed their strange bodies to the setting sun. Above their heads, the emerald light of the spheres flickered like so many fires about to go out.

Suddenly, the foliage stirred and a sound of footsteps sounded. Spearheads flashed between the trees. Screams of horror, disgust, or rage arose even as the last trace of the ***Erriten*** 's mchawi faded away. Their blackened spheres crashed to earth where they shattered into hundreds of fragments that vanished like smoke.

And the survivors of the negus' army, drunk with revenge, commanded by Ras Amayehu, threw themselves on the helpless Erriten.

Nkwana ***'s impis were on the march. Like a swarm of warrior ants, the soldiers of the Western Highlands marched ruthlessly eastward, and their sheer numbers blackened the hills like shadows at dusk.***

Nkwana had become an nkosi ***of*** nkosi. ***Isangoma*** from ***a dozen tribes had confirmed him in this role in solemn rites unlike anything seen in the Highlands since Mkwayo had become monomatapa of Amanyani. With the status that was now his, Nkwana was able to use*** mfecane ***to fight against*** mfecane...

He didn't forget the tsubi victims that were found all over the Highlands. If his route passed across the country devastated by cattle killers, his army was still pursued by people with hollowed-out sockets who had lost all their means of subsistence.
Nkwana offered them food and enlisted them for the impending battle against Shingane. Having heard of the Tsubi's defeat, the survivors readily accepted.

And Nkwana's forces swell...

13.
THE MAN OF DARKNESS

Imaro heard his pursuers long before he allowed them to see him. He was waiting for them, his ***kufahuma*** having warned him long ago that men were on their heels. They were no more than half a dozen. He estimated that they must have been following him since about noon. The sun was slowly sinking on the horizon and the tall hills were beginning to cast their tapering shadows. He was in the southwestern part of the Highlands. He could have avoided them, but preferred confrontation to flight.

Maybe they know where Bohu is.

Imaro told himself that the wizard had either fled to Naama or found refuge in Shingane Citadel. And he was in Shingane territory now. He knew this because the dwellings were shaped like beehives rather than that mixture of cones and cylinders favored by Western tribes. Solosha had taught him to tell them apart, even going so far as to describe in detail the assemblages of straw that overhung the roofs of oriental dwellings.

To his surprise, Imaro realized that Solosha's presence was missing. But he chased away his regrets.

If Bohu had told the truth about his relations with the Erriten, it was logical that he had found refuge in the land of Shingane, but Imaro's bracelets had remained inert. There were only a few ***mchawi*** in this region. Strength lay far more in the spears of ***Shingane*** impis.

Imaro carefully scanned the eminences in front of him. Most of the peaks in the region were bare rock, rising like decayed teeth from the grassy slopes. He spotted a black crevasse that split a rocky peak. The opening was large enough to hide in. Thanks to the crevices in the wall, he was able to hoist himself up to a good height and, a few moments later, he was comfortably installed and sheltered from the heat.

A part of him stood guard, watching the trail he came to borrow. The other sank into the meanders of his soul...

Nomvula: You didn't have to die. And yet you died, of your own free will, and in terrible pain. Why ?

Why was your life of such little value to you? Tanisha, Kilewo: Bohu says you're not dead. Why can't I believe it? Solosha: You've seen the worst in me. You have been the witness of the misfortune that falls on all those who are close to me. And yet you are still my friend. And I do not know why.

Pomphis: By my side, you have survived dangers worse than those faced by Solosha. I doubted you, I trusted you, and I learned from you. I wonder if I'll ever see you alive again.

Katisa: You are my mother, yet you entrusted me to the Ilyassai to fulfill a prophecy you had no reason to believe. Did the prophecy tell you what you will be in my eyes once the conflict with the Naama is behind us?

Mkwayo: You are my father. You told me that your people would welcome me as one of their own. They did, and at the same time, they didn't. Either you didn't know them or you don't know me.

Kandisa: What do you know? What do you see ? Are you spying on me right now? Do you know what I'll do next?

Bohu: You humiliated me. And yet you are a liar. You pretend that I am like you. But I'm not... I'm not.

Imaro shifted quietly. His sword lay across his thighs. His ears told him that those who were chasing him were closing in.

I could only end up alone.

This thought was nothing new to him.

"Is he ***daring*** us to follow him?"

The person who had just asked the question, and whose name was Mfokaza, was one of the mtatwa warriors who tracked Imaro.

"Who would be crazy enough to do that?" mocked Mhlapo, the leader of the small band. He probably doesn't know we're after him.

Mhlapo was a young warrior who had just begun to save the money he would have to pay to take his first wife when Shingane became ***nkosi*** of the Mtatwa.

Powerfully built and skilled in the use of weapons, he had stood out during the first battles of the ***mfecane.***

But it was his skills as a sleuth and not as a warrior that had earned him the attention of Shingane. While he only had four men at the moment and not a full ***impi ,*** Mhlapo was entitled to wear the civet tail that dangled from the end of the ring that circled his head, signaling that he was an ***induna,*** a man of high rank in Shingan's army.

"Whether he knows we're behind him or not, only a lunatic would cross these hills alone," Mfokaza said, to which several of the warriors nodded.

Their armament was reduced to a small shield, a spear and a club each. Their spears were barbed, like Ixwa, the weapon forged for Shingane by the Dark Man, the one who whispered secrets of death into the ***nkosi's ear.***

"Even the mad fear the warriors of Shingane," Mhlapo said. Silence now. We're close enough that he can hear us, if he's on the prowl.

The others fell silent and followed suit. The track was uneven. Sometimes the footprints of their prey were so visible that a child could have followed them. But sometimes they demanded all of Mhlapo's concentration.

Is he having fun with us? Mhlapo suddenly wondered with a feeling of unease.

The trail disappeared as they passed a crevasse. In appearance, it looked like all the others, but suddenly a dark form dropped across the path, just behind the warriors.

The one behind died before he knew he had been attacked, Imaro's sword severing his neck. The Ilyassai snatched his spear from his hands as he slumped to the ground. The other warriors reacted quickly, but by the time they turned, Imaro was already upon them, sword in one hand, spear in the other.

A second Mtatwa fell, his throat pierced by the tip of the spear. Blood spurted from the gaping wound and spattered the shields of the Mtatwa's companions, now down to three.

Raising their shields, the survivors tried to surround Imaro. These shields were half the size of those of the Abamba. They

served to deflect the blows much more than to absorb them. Imaro's sword slashed through them as his spear deceived the guard of his opponents.

The Mtatwa could not reach Imaro with their own weapons. Spear blows that couldn't logically miss their target passed by, while the stranger's boots never missed. A third Mtatwa fell, then the fourth. Only Mhlapo was alive. Throwing what was left of his shield in Imaro's face, ***the induna*** mtatwa lunged at his mysterious adversary. With a swing of his sword, Imaro severed his spear.

Mhlapo's hand flew to his club. He broke off mid-step when the tip of Imaro's sword pressed against his throat.

Beads of sweat traced furrows on Mhlapo's forehead.
Shingane had forbidden his warriors to show their fear, death being the punishment of cowards. But all feared their ***nkosi*** and his ***isangoma.***
Mhlapo understood that he also feared the gigantic, silent stranger who stood before him. The warrior lacked the titanic bulk of Shingane, but his thick, well-cut muscles gave him a far more menacing appearance than the Great Elephant.

The stranger wore no insignia, no decoration indicating his rank or his tribe, even if he looked like an Abamba. Then Mhlapo saw the red beads strung around his neck. And he remembered what he had heard about the western tribe that the Mtatwa would soon face.

They carry drops of blood across their throats, said ***the isangoma*** Mhlapo had spoken to that day.

It was at this moment that the stranger spoke.

"You are a Mtatwa," he said.

Mhlapo understood what Imaro was saying, for the languages of the Highlands had many words in common, the variations being primarily a matter of intonation and region. But the stranger spoke with an accent he had never heard before.

"You come from the west," said the Mtatwa.

Imaro nodded.

"Are you mad to come alone to the land of the Great Elephant?" Mhlapo asked.

"Shingane is advised by the Dark Man," Imaro said without answering the question. Is he with him now?

Mhlapo knew he shouldn't answer an enemy's questions. But he also knew who this Dark Man was that the stranger was talking about. A figure that always stood like a shadow beside the Great Elephant, pushing Shingane to commit more atrocities and depredations...

Imaro pressed Mhlapo's throat a little harder. A pearl of blood appeared and ran down his skin.

“Speak… or die.

'It doesn't matter whether I speak or not,' said the Mtatwa. I died of anyway. Shingane will kill me for failing to kill you.

"If you tell me what I want to know, I'll let you live so you can free the spirits of your men," Imaro said. If you don't speak, I will kill you and your spirits will then be imprisoned within you while the hyenas feast on your flesh.

Mhlapo was unable to suppress a shiver. A properly buried body, with its stomach open, would release his spirit which would then join that of his ancestors. But the spirit of one who died without the proper rituals would turn into an evil ghost, which would eventually break free from its chains but would never reincarnate into the body of a descendant. This was a fear that transcended all others. Almost unbeknownst to her, Mhlapo began to speak.

"The Dark Man has been gone for a long time," he said. Shingane misses him, but not us warriors. Shingane made sacrifices in hopes of bringing the Dark Man back. That's why we hunt strangers like you... so we won't be the next to be sacrificed.

Imaro was silent for such a long time that Mhlapo felt compelled to speak again.

“I told you the truth. If you don't believe me, kill me now and spare me the torture of having to wait.

- I believe you.

The warrior lowered his sword. Mhlapo let out a sigh of relief as the stranger slid his blade back into its sheath. He didn't know what he would do after freeing his companions' spirits, but he was alive. It was already that. He never saw the fist that suddenly crashed under his jaw, plunging him into the darkness of unconsciousness.

Imaro caught the Mtatwa in his fall, then laid him down next to the others. He had carefully calculated the force of his blow, and he was certain that the Mtatwa would regain his senses before the scavengers arrived. And if not... He shrugged.

He is an excellent tracker. I can't afford to have it on my heels.

He bent down and picked up the club of one of the dead. He added it to the other weapons which constituted his paraphernalia. During the short time he had spent with the Ngwikas, he had learned to use it effectively.

He looked successively north and south. He knew Shingane had pitched camp to the north. Before long the Mtatwa and the Ngwika would face each other in the battle that would decide the future of the Highlands. If the army of Nkwana and Solosha prevailed, the ***mfecane*** would be finished and the southern route, towards the Naama, would be open to the armies of the monomatapa. If Shingane won, the Highlands would return to Naama. And the empire of the monomatapa would therefore be vulnerable to an attack in force by the coalition troops of the Highlands.

Imaro knew he would find Bohu further south. The sorcerer absent from the battlefield, the outcome of the confrontation between the Ngwika and the Mtatwa would be decided according to courage and skill much more than ***mchawi.*** Imaro knew his people had plenty. His presence wouldn't be necessary, even if he yearned to face Shingane in single combat.

Bohu remained his priority, but Imaro chose to detour north.
He wouldn't stay there long. But he would give Shingane the opportunity to think that a new Dark Man was roaming his lands, but a Dark Man who would no longer be the Great Elephant's ally...

The Shingane army encampment was so large that its population was larger than that of many stone cities in Maguvurunde. The warriors' shelters were arranged in concentric circles. With the night, the fires flickered like so many stars fallen on earth.

Fifty thousand warriors were gathered in the great valley, which was called Ngundlovu. The army was divided into fifty ***impis,*** each commanded by an ***induna.*** The ***indunas*** had been chosen by Shingane, and they constituted in themselves a war council which saw to carrying out the instructions of the ***nkosi.***

Earlier that day, Shingane had chosen two ***indunas*** to replace those he had killed with Ixwa. The ***nkosi*** had accompanied his ***impis*** on a practice run in the oppressive afternoon heat. Despite his obesity, Shingane could move with amazing grace and speed, and in such training it was not uncommon for him to outclass seasoned fighters much thinner than himself.

The warriors of two ***impis*** had not been able to sustain the rhythm imposed by Shingane. When he saw the delay of these two regiments, he summoned their ***indunas.***

And Ixwa had eaten.

Now Shingane sat beneath a thatched pavilion erected by his ***indunas*** and consecrated by his most faithful ***isangoma.*** The place was guarded by a contingent of those known as the Twins, a total of twenty warriors, each of whom was almost as massive as their ***nkosi.***

The function of the Twins was to confuse potential assassins, who would find themselves forced to kill these doppelgangers at the same time as Shingane if they wanted to be certain of the success of their mission. No assassin had yet managed to even get to the Twins. Several attempts had indeed taken place in the early days, just after he became ***nkosi,*** but no one had tried for a long time to take the life of the Great Elephant. It was the Dark Man who had come up with the idea for the Twins.

Shingane was not thinking of a possible assassination attempt that evening. He could hear the crackling of the flames above which roasted the meats brought as tribute by the men of the conquered ***kraals .***
He sat in the midst of the most powerful army ever raised in the Highlands. His will and his whims were law there. And he was ready to march west to crush the Ngwika there as he had crushed so many other tribes before.

Shingane was however uncomfortable in this night, as for several weeks. The Great Elephant was alone. The Dark Man, the one who had been his guide and his companion, who had been the originator of the ***mfecane,*** was gone. And Shingane was beginning to realize how dependent he was on what the Dark Man had whispered to his mind…

Are you testing me? Have I not always followed your instructions in everything, and more? I gave you enough lives to clutter the Gods' Copse. I have seized the land and the cattle that you

coveted, and I never asked for more than was due to me. All this I did for you. So why are you leaving me now?

Bohu did not answer him. The fear that had begun to gnaw at Shingane suddenly turned angry.

"I don't need the Dark Man," Shingane said aloud. Am I not the power that warriors respect? Am I not the Great Elephant?

Shingan straightened up. He dominated the scene with all his mass. He picked up Ixwa, who was never far from his hand.

“Dumisa,” he called. Come here.

One of the Twins entered. He was a new recruit. He had taken the place of a Twin killed during the last battle fought by the Mtatwa. As usual, it had been more of a massacre than a battle.

"Dumisa," Shingane said softly. Who owns your life? To the Dark Man, or me?

Dumisa bit her lip. He was young. The folds of fat that hung from his body were the result of deliberate overeating intended to obtain a position among the Twins. He was more than familiar with Shingane's habits, the life and death questions posed to both men and women.

"My life is yours, ***nkosi,*** " Dumisa replied, sensing Shingane's impatience.

- And I can take it when I want, is not it?

Dumisa could only nod. His heart knotted in his stomach, because he knew he was about to die.

- And if by chance it took me the idea to take it right away? Shingan asked.

“My life is yours, ***nkosi.***

Ixwa ate. Dumisa fell. The unease in Shingane's soul receded.

"I don't need you, Dark Man," he muttered.

Shingane spent the rest of the night sleeping near Dumisa's corpse, to show that he was not afraid of the avenging spirit of the warrior.

He did not know that the sentries guarding the perimeter of the camp were dying one after another.

In the early morning, Jua the sun shone mercilessly on the corpses of the sentries. All had had their throats cut so that they could not raise the alarm. There was no trace of a struggle. Not a trace of the sneaky assassin.

It was as if a spirit had struck from outside the camp, doing its work of death with a steel claw...

When Shingane received the news of the sentries' deaths, his anger was like a storm, reaching a climax beyond anything his men had ever witnessed. The ***indunas*** exchanged uneasy looks. They knew that Shingane had killed Dumisa the day before. Ixwa kept eating. No one was safe; the Mtatwa could do nothing but wait for Shingane's anger to dissipate. When it finally did, blood and corpses littered the camp, and an ominous foreboding hung in the air.

Imaro now advanced south, easily dodging trackers and scouts who were distracted by the wrath of their ***nkosi.*** It had been very simple to kill the sentries. The Mtatwa had become too sure of themselves. Imaro had found more than one dozing guard at his post. He had learned to move quietly in his youth on the Tamburure, and the technique was just as effective in the Highlands.

He had been tempted to approach Shingane himself, but Bohu was the target he wanted to kill, not the Great Elephant. Imaro was more certain than ever that the Ngwika would prevail in the coming battle. The Mtatwa showed all the signs of a warrior horde that had grown too accustomed to victory to contemplate the very idea of defeat.

As he moved at a rapid pace through the hills, Imaro considered the chaos that must have reigned in Shingane's encampment, and he smiled. It was a smile that didn't reach his eyes. It was a smile devoid of any warmth. A smile that would not have shocked Bohu's face.

The Naama who had been driven from Mlongo were advancing west, hoping to find a road that would take them south rather than to Maguvurunde, the last place they wanted to go.

After their defeat under the ramparts of Mlongo, the Naama retreated only to find themselves confronted by the Kitwanian refugees who had fled the town when it fell to the Naama. Drunk with revenge, the Kitwanians had swooped down on them like a cloud of locusts, but they were ill-equipped and lacked discipline. The Naama had forced their way through their ranks with steel, at the cost of further casualties.

Now the last survivors of the Naama troops and their allies advanced through the countryside. Of the substantial force that had mounted north with the five Erriten, less than five hundred men remained.
Naamas walked beside Abamba; irimu ***shared their water with*** unthlatu; ***izingogo*** were employed ***as scouts and as hunters for the whole troop. Their differences no longer mattered. Survival was their only priority.***

The few officers they had left were discussing their destination. If they returned to the High City in the Reachlands, their fate was sealed.
Death was the price the Erriten exacted from those who failed. But Naama was a vast country. There were entire regions the Erriten did not know. It was possible to find refuge there… if they lived long enough to find it.

Which was not the case.
During the second week of their retreat, an Izingogo scout ran ***back to the soldiers and passed them without a backward glance. Soon after, the Naama found themselves surrounded by the army the monomatapa had dispatched to help Majnun regain his throne.***
Majnun rode at the head of the troops. On his order, the soldiers of Maguvurunde and the Kitwanians who accompanied them massacred the Naama, their allies and even the izingogo, ***who were hunted down and exterminated to the last.***
Majnun had taken revenge in part. But his mood was neither triumphant nor overjoyed, for he knew what would await him on his return to Mlongo.

14.

LANDSCAPE

The monomatapa and Pomphis were perched on their ***mbizi,*** side by side on a parade ground, outside the walls of Mji-Amanyani. The two men watched the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere,*** the warriors mounted on rhinos. There were dozens of them on the field, charging, spinning and throwing their horns upwards in unison. Men and animals were perfectly coordinated and the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** executed complex maneuvers without the slightest misstep. Jua the sun's rays gleamed off the ***chipimbere*** 's greased harnesses and the sweaty skin of their riders, who had stripped of their armor for the occasion.

“You say your kandisa has bigger beasts of war than these? Mkwayo asked.

He had to shout to be heard above the roar of
thunder from the ***chipimbere's paws.***

— Yes, replied Pomphis, but yours are more agile.

Mkwayo threw his head back and burst out laughing.

- Diplomat through and through, huh? I understand why the kandisa has full confidence in your qualities as an emissary.

Pomphis smiled at this compliment. He kept watching Mkwayo then
that the latter's attention had once again turned to the maneuvers.

Like his soldiers, Mkwayo was shirtless. In his prime, he still had supple, earth-colored skin, and his frame was only slightly less powerful than Imaro's. Young man, thought Pomphis, the man would have been his son's equal. The difference between the two was the supernatural potential the Cloud Strider had bestowed on Imaro before he was born.

But if they were similar in appearance, the personalities of Imaro and Mkwayo were totally different. Mkwayo was an individual

warm, generous, whose enthusiasm and charisma had transformed Maguvurunde from a hornet's nest torn apart by infighting into a tight-knit empire poised to march against Naama.

In the brief time since his arrival in Mji Amanyani, Pomphis had heard Mkwayo longer than Imaro in more than five rains. Mkwayo loved life; Imaro supported her.

If only Imaro could look more like his father, Pomphis thought.

Then he wouldn't be the weapon the kandisa needs, the logical part of his mind told him.

Pomphis did not always appreciate the analytical, calculating part of his personality. But until the war against the Naama was won, that would be the one he would pay most attention to.

He could see the tension underlying the monomatapa's apparent composure. He knew that Mkwayo, like many, was getting impatient with the long wait.

The soldiers had received their equipment. The battle plans had been seen and reviewed by Mkwayo and his ***mtekwas.*** The supply routes were ready and amply supplied. Weapons and warlike abilities had been honed. The Maguvurunde army was ready. She was only waiting for a word from the south to start the long walk towards the Naama.

A courier had already crossed the Zimbazi River to inform the monomatapa of the victory of the Ngwika over the Tsubi. But that was only half the battle. Before the monomatapa's army could cross the Highlands, they would have to defeat the ***impis*** of Shingane.

"I'm sure we'll hear from your brother very soon," Pomphis said, when the maneuvers were over.

Mkwayo flashed a smile at the Bambuti.

“Pomphis, there are times I could swear on Udali that you can read my thoughts. Yes, all this waiting weighs on me. But Nkwana is a good warrior. I have no doubt that he can defeat Shingane. I just wish Imaro was by his side.

“You know why it's not,” said Pomphis.

Mkwayo's smile disappeared.

- Yes. I know what the messenger said. Imaro has gone to hunt down this Bohu. And we don't know yet if he succeeded or not. But Solosha, son of Nkwana, left with him. Between them, they should be able to settle any wizard's case.

Mkwayo got down from the saddle.

"I must go to my soldiers now," he said abruptly.

I'm sorry my friend, thought Pomphis as he watched the monomatapa walk away. ***I do not like to agitate the doubts which assail you already, perhap But it is better that you keep in mind that you have these doubts.***

Katisa was in her private enclosure. Part of the thatched roof had been removed to allow the sun to shine into the rounded hall with granite walls. The furnishings were sparse: a sleeping mat, a few lengths of cloth, several stools, vases and clay containers, and a large oval mat decorated with motifs of mythical animals and which served as a dining table.

Several of Katisa's servants were with her. Most were young women who had undergone the rites of puberty a few rains before. They were not servants, but the daughters of important people who sought to reinforce their status by placing their children in the households of the women of the monomatapa.

The next ones were busy sewing beads on Katisa's clothes and headdress. As the decorations were constantly changed, these patterns were rarely the same from time to time. Katisa was busy sharpening the tip of a spear. Even if the following ones knew for a long time - if not being accustomed to it - the strange mores of the dakamatapa, they could not help watching her out of the corner of their eyes while she rubbed the stone on the extremity. of iron.

The spear was an ***arem,*** the Ilyassai's weapon of choice. Katisa had an Amanyani blacksmith shape it according to his instructions. The blade alone was half the length of the weapon. The following remembered that the dakamatapa had been raised among a warrior tribe in which men and women learned the use of weapons.

They also remembered that before Katisa became the dakamatapa, she had been an ***mpunia,*** a bandit. And that she had fought in the arenas of Amanyani alongside the man who was to become the monomatapa.

Like Mkwayo, Katisa preferred plain clothes to royal decorations and finery. Her servants had put on their finest ***njobos,*** split in many places to reveal great swaths of flesh. Katisa had only a simple impala skin tunic, which covered her body from breasts to thighs. When she wasn't

confined by a royal crown, her hair was an unruly black mane.

I got used to having hair on my head, Katisa thought as she continued to sharpen the spear. Among the Ilyassai and all the tribes of Tamburure, women shaved their heads from puberty. For these tribes, a hairy woman was an abomination. On the contrary, in Maguvurunde, only ***mhondoro*** priestesses shaved like this.
Any other woman doing so would immediately be stoned for blasphemy, which had almost happened to her before she wisely decided to let her hair grow.

She looked at her attendants…all of whom quickly looked away.

They think I'm crazy to join my husband on the battlefield, she thought. But she and Mkwayo had fought side by side in the arena when both were still slaves in the realm they now ruled. They would cover each other in the coming war.

Maybe I'll even fight next to my son...

She couldn't help wondering what Imaro would have been like if he had been raised as an Amanyani rather than among the Ilyassai.
She shoved that thought away violently. She had abandoned her son at the request of the Cloud Strider. She knew she would have to learn to understand her son for who he really was, not who she dreamed of before they were finally reunited.

Noises from the entrance brought her back to the present moment. The door might be guarded by soldiers, but Katisa's hand closed on the handle of her ***arem.*** She recognized the voice of the person: Mwazwenyi.

"Let her in," she told the guards.

Katisa noticed immediately that the arrogance had disappeared from the concubine, despite the harsh tone she had used with the guards. The pearls of her ***njobo*** were impeccably attached. It was said that she beat her servants for the slightest error in their work.

Beneath the circle of leather around his head, Mwazwenyi pierced Katisa with his gaze. For a fleeting moment, his old arrogance was back. Katisa's hand did not leave the hilt of her spear.

She still sees me as an outsider doubled as a slave who has usurped her son's inheritance, she thought.

Many times, Katisa had to refrain from giving Mwazwenyi a lesson in humility. Now she didn't know if she would be able to curb her urge to humiliate the young woman. But the haughty tone disappeared from Mwazwenyi's eyes as quickly as it had appeared.

“Dakamatapa, I want to talk to you… privately.

Katisa was stunned by Mwazwenyi's deferential tone. She read the mute plea in his eyes, and saw panic there too. Katisa understood then that there was more to this than a simple affair of jealousy.

She knew that Mwazwenyi could not hurt her, physically at least. With a nod, Katisa told her attendants to leave the room. Once the two women were alone, Mwazwenyi sat down on a stool, buried her face in her hands, and burst into tears. Katisa could only remain dumbfounded, surprised to see Mwazwenyi losing control of herself at this point, and especially in front of someone who was in no way among her friends.

Katisa put her ***weapon*** against the wall and approached the young woman. She put a shy hand on his shoulder. With her face still concealed in her hands, Mwazwenyi leaned gratefully against Katisa. They stayed like that until the flood of tears subsided. Removing his hands from his face streaming with tears, Mwazwenyi
began to speak, punctuating his story with sobs and gasps.

“I did a horrible thing,” she said. I can't tell
Mkwyo... Oh, Country, Country...

- What did you do ? Katisa asked. And why come and talk to me about it?

Mwazwenyi disengaged from Katisa and tried to control the spasms that shook her whole body.

"You're a stranger," she finally said. You will not condemn me in advance for what I have to tell you. I'm not asking you to help me...
Just listen to me.

"I'll listen to you," Katisa said.

She led the young woman to the other end of the room, where the guards couldn't hear them. She gave a piece of cloth to Mwazwenyi to dry her tears, and placed two stools facing each other so that they could converse in low voices.

They sat down and Mwazwenyi told her story…

When Mwazwenyi led Peyisai to the ***mhondoro temple,*** the eldest of the priestesses was waiting for them. She wore nothing but a piece of black cloth tied around her waist. From his skull to his toes, his skin was coated with a yellow pigment that filled in the furrows of his wrinkles. She looked like both a very young child and a stooped witch, with that velvety skin, her odd position and her saggy breasts.

Mwazwenyi put a firm hand on her son's shoulder and felt that he was shaking. But she didn't blame him, because she shared his fear.

"Why did you come here?" asked the priestess.

His strong, clear voice belied his age. Even though she was addressing a monomatapa's wife, there was not the slightest hint of deference in the tone of her voice.

"I am Mwazwenyi, of the line of Mhlanga, the one who overthrew the Inyanga conquerors in the era following the fall of the Chezwi," she began, in a monotonous rhythm, like a text learned by heart. The spirit of Mhlanga is reincarnated in my son Peyisai, despite his Abamba blood. I have come to free this spirit, so that Peyisai becomes what his illustrious ancestor was. The Amanyani needs Mhlanga just as much as when he was alive.

The priestess was silent for a moment. There was more light in the temple than the darkened entrance suggested, thanks to openings in the walls that let in sunlight. The floor was decorated with a series of small canopies in lacquered clay. On each was placed an animal figurine: crocodile, rhinoceros, vulture, elephant, ibis, hyena... A canopy, surrounded by four stakes arranged at regular intervals, was empty.

The priestess spoke again.

"Do you think your son, possessed by the spirit of Mhlanga, has more rightfully his place on the throne as the son of Katisa.

Mwazwenyi nodded. ***Mhondoro*** priestesses were confined to their temples, but their influence extended far beyond. She wasn't surprised that the priestess knew about her long-held plan. The madness that had gradually taken hold of her blinded her to other possibilities.

"Are you forgetting the war against the Naama?" asked the priestess. A claim by Peyisai would call into question the current preparations for the monomatapa.

"I don't care about this war," Mwazwenyi fumed. It's a huge bullshit. The Naama have always been content to stay at the other end of the sea. Mkwayo is stupid to want to empty our country of all our fighters and leave it at the mercy of an attack by the Abamba savages.

"Is Mkwayo a savage?" asked the priestess calmly.

Mwazwenyi sat up and took a haughty position, ceasing to to follow the ritual.

“I didn't come here to quibble, priestess. I have the right to invoke and arouse the spirit of Peyisai's illustrious ancestor. You have no right to object to this.

The priestess said nothing, but the temperature in the temple suddenly cooled, and Peyisai came to hug her mother. Mwazwenyi struggled to conceal his own fear. The gaze of the priestess attracted her, and she couldn't tear herself away from it.

Then the shiver disappeared. In a heartbeat, the priestess' eyes were no longer those deep wells of supernatural power. They were only filled with wisdom… and sadness.

- You have the right ... So it will be so. I also have all the reasons personal to do this job for you.

"What reasons?" Mwazwenyi asked.

- Do you dare to ask?

Mwazwenyi's scathing response died on his lips. She was starting to feel as small as Peyisai in front of this old priestess.

“There's nothing wrong with me giving you my reasons. After all, you you will probably agree with them.

Mwazwenyi waited, trying to hide his impatience.

“Mkwayo is an extraordinary man, but it is through you that the line of Mhlanga continues. If Katisa's son becomes the monomatapa, the throne will no longer be associated with a ***mhondoro spirit.*** And the one belief that matters more to our people than any other will be challenged.

"I see," said Mwazwenyi.

The priestess smiled, showing her white teeth which contrasted with her pigment-yellowed skin.

"You would have made a good priestess," she said. You know there's a price to pay for the ceremony. I can't proceed without it.

Mwazwenyi reached into his ***njobo*** and took out a gold jewel representing a coiled serpent. It had been crafted with such skill that, however small it was, it was easy to see that it was a mamba, one of the most venomous snakes of the Nyumbani.

The priestess took the figurine and placed it on a canopy, next to the others. The payment was a relic of times past, when the people of Maguvurunde worshiped clan symbols.

She took Peysai by hand.

'Come, my child,' she said in a surprisingly gentle voice. It's time for you to meet Mhlanga.

Peyisai, frightened, tried to resist, until he felt his mother's hands pushing him forward. He understood that he had no hope of escaping it. He wanted his father, but knew that now was not the time to appeal to him.

The priestess led him to the empty canopy, and asked him to stand in its center. After imposing silence on Mwazwenyi, she came to stand in front of Peyisai and began to intone incomprehensible syllables to mother and son.

The stories are true, Mwazwenyi thought uneasily. ***The priestesses have really a language of their own...***

Peyisai stood straight, but her head began to nod and her eyes to freeze. The carved carvings on the four stakes began to twist and twist like serpents. Then they detached and came to float gently towards Peyisai, under the bewildered eyes of Mwazwenyi. The priestess chanted a word that Mwazwenyi clearly understood:

"Come... come... come...

Mwazwenyi suddenly wanted to snatch his son from the pedestal and run away from the temple. But his ambition, his jealousy and his madness soon swept away these impulses. She remained still and silent as the priestess continued her chant.

The sinuous tendrils that the sculptures had become now enveloped Peyisai's figure like filaments. The boy had no reaction when they touched his skin.

Suddenly, the priestess choked on her words. She staggered as if she had received a blow. Peyisai's head snapped up. His eyes widened in terror. And the tendrils slid inside his skin.

An emerald glint shone in the boy's eyes. His face changed. His features twisted into an evil mask. Then the light disappeared and Peyisai was himself again. He gave his mother an accusing look, a look that pierced her soul, before her eyes rolled into their sockets and only white was visible. Then he sank limply.

Mwazwenyi rushed past the priestess who stood petrified. Leaning over her son, she put a hand on his chest. His heartbeat gradually resumed a normal rhythm. She took him in her arms and turned to the priestess, who remained rigid. Only his eyes moved, rolling from side to side as if trying to escape their sockets. Then her lips moved.

“Not Mhlanga,” she croaked, her voice thin and tense. It is not the spirit of Mhlanga… In your son… Something evil…
Maleficent…

A sob choking deep in his throat, Mwazwenyi quickly carried Peyisai out of the temple. Her guards asked no questions as she laid her unconscious son across the saddle of her ***mbizi.*** It was well known that ***mhondoro*** ceremonies could be difficult and taxing.

Throughout her frantic return to ***the imba,*** Mwazwenyi kept hearing echoes of the priestess's words: ***Something evil... Evil...***

“Peyisai is two people now,” Mwazwenyi concluded. He is himself… and he is also ***the other.*** On several occasions, this ***other*** met secretly with ***ndaus*** who never accepted Mkwayo's right to be a monomatapa. These ***ndaus*** are convinced that the spirit of Mhlanga lives in Peyisai. But I know it's not about Mhlanga. And I'm scared…

As Mwazwenyi hid his face in grief, Katisa's first impulse was to knock him out. She was certain that Mwazwenyi's ambition had driven her to open a door through which the ***mchawi*** of the Erriten had rushed to possess Peyisai, and from there foment dissension in Mkwayo's empire. If the unrest continued, the Maguvurunde forces might not be in a position to march to the Naama once Nkwana put an end to the ***mfecane.***

"So you come to see me," said Katisa. Why ?

Mwazwenyi looked at her. There was neither arrogance nor disdain in his manner now. No more than madness. Her experiences in the temple had purged her of those flaws. There was only fear and shame in his eyes, and also worry about Peyisai.

"My son terrifies me when he becomes ***the other,*** " she said. And it can happen anytime. What was done to him in the temple must be undone.
But I'm scared... I'm so scared.

Katisa says nothing.

"But you," continued Mwazwenyi, "are a warrior." You have been touched by the Cloud Strider. You could take Peyisai back to the mhondoro temple ***and*** compel the priestess to undo the summons.

Katisa's face was unreadable.

“If that ***other*** is indeed fomenting a rebellion, then Mkwayo must be put on trial. current, she said.

- Nope ! cried Mwazwenyi, grabbing Katisa's hand. Mkwayo must not know! He would repudiate me. I could not live with such disgrace.

Katisa tore herself from his hands.

"What can it do to me?" she asked.

The memory of all the rudeness she had shown towards
of Katisa came back to him.

There is a price to pay, the priestess had said. Now Mwazwenyi knew that this price was higher than the gold figurine she had left in the temple.

“I'm not important,” she admitted. It's Peyisai that counts. He is innocent. But do you think Mkwayo will look at him the same once he learns what he has become? What happened to my son is not his fault. It was beyond his will, beyond his control…like your son.

She's right, whispered the voice of guilt that hadn't left Katisa since she'd made peace with Imaro. It was a guilt that had accompanied her ever since she had left Imaro with the Ilyassai.

When Mwazwenyi looked at her, his eyes were pleading. Katisa understood that Mwazwenyi was about to throw herself at her feet and implore her. And she didn't want that.

What good would it do you if Mkwayo repudiated her? Maybe she learned something from this experience? Maybe she's ready to

hear what I know about Imaro.

“You took Peyisai to the temple to make sure it was he, and not Imaro, who succeeded Mkwayo as emperor.

Mwazwenyi nodded.

“Know this, then. Imaro will never become emperor. It's not what he wants.

Mwazwenyi's eyes widened in surprise.

"Did he tell you that?"

"No," replied Katisa. He didn't need to. I am his mother.
I know his heart. He's a warrior and an adventurer… not an emperor.

"Did you say that to Mkwayo?"

“No,” Katisa answered without blinking. It was not possible. As
it is impossible for you to tell him what happened to Peyisai.

Mwazwenyi was stunned. All the hate…all his plans…for nothing. The two women stared at each other for a moment, and only for a moment did they understand each other.

"I'm going to help Peyisai," Katisa said. And I won't say anything to Mkwayo. Now tell me everything that happened in the temple.

Mwazwenyi made no attempt to conceal his gratitude. The two women talked for most of the day, much to the perplexity of the guards, who knew their enmity well.

Solosha and Bengeshe caught up with Nkwana's army in the central part of the Highlands. Solosha had no idea how far the warriors had traveled since leaving the Tsubi land.
Bengeshe knew this very precisely.

When the scouts spotted Bengeshe and saw that she was an umuti, ***they were tempted to spear her first and ask questions later. But they recognized Solosha.***

The scouts escorted the warrior and the umuti ***to Nkwana, who greeted his son with undisguised relief and enthusiasm.***
He was much more reserved towards Bengeshe.

Nkwana listened intently to their tale, only interrupting them when Solosha spoke of Imaro's decision to go south to find Bohu there instead of joining the battle against Shingane.

" ***He would have been useful to us," said the*** nkosi, " ***but if he chose not to join us... So be it.***

Then he glanced at Bengeshe.

" *You will stay with us," he said.*

The warriors exchanged puzzled looks as Nkwana and Solosha walked away. The ones they fired at Bengeshe were much less ambiguous.

15.

THE OTHER

"It's time, Jendayi," Katisa said.

In the dim light in the ***mhuri,*** Katisa could barely make out the other woman's nod. Jendayi was old and had achieved real fame throughout the Amanyani as a ***tabibu,*** herbalist.
She had long since stopped practicing, but continued to teach young women the wisdom of plants and potions.

When Katisa was a young girl among the Ilyassai, she had learned things from the herbalists of the tribe. Her exile had put an end to this apprenticeship, and as dakamatapa of Amanyani, she had had little time to perfect her education.

Jendayi reminded him of his mentor ilyassai. Although she was not studying plant art in the strict sense of the word, Katisa often came to visit the ***tabibu*** in her ***mhuri*** which was far beyond the enclosures of Mji Amanyani. The two women had become friends over the rains, but Katisa had just seriously jeopardized the ties that united them a few hours earlier.

"Don't worry, Jendayi," Katisa said. If I succeed tonight, no one will ever know the role you played. And if I fail, you won't be held responsible.

“I only did it because I believe what you told me about Peyisai,” Jendayi replied. The ***mhondoro*** priestess is an old friend of mine.
We played together when we were little girls, and I'm one of the few who remember her name, which was taken from her when she became a priestess. We took different paths after our puberty rites. But I know her well. She will do everything she can to undo what Mwazwenyi has done.

“Yes…provided I can bring Peyisai to the temple,” Katisa said.

"Then it's time to start," Jendayi said.

Katisa stood up, her body a thin silhouette in the dark. She was still wearing the tunic she had on when Mwazwenyi came to see her two days earlier. She was holding her ***arem*** and a cord of braided grass was wrapped around her left shoulder.

She had visited Jendayi on the same day she spoke with Mwazwenyi. Jendayi had, in turn, contacted the ***mhondoro priestess,*** who had agreed to attempt to reverse Peyisai's possession.

Katisa knew that Peyisai was organizing a rally of dissident ***ndaus*** that night. The boy, or rather the Other, had bragged about it to his mother, and Mwazwenyi had passed the information on to Katisa.

The Other's hold on Peyisai would be loosened tonight, if Katisa managed to capture him and drag him to the ***mhondoro temple.*** However, it had to be done without the knowledge of Mkwayo and the ***ndaus,*** loyal or rebellious.

Katisa smiled in the darkness. She tightened her grip on the shaft of her spear. She hadn't faced a challenge of this magnitude since the end of the wars that had resulted in the creation of the empire. She knew the consequences of failure, which spurred her even more and strengthened her resolve.

"I'm going," Katisa said. Thanks for everything you've done.

"Be careful," said Jendayi.

Katisa stepped out of the ***mhuri*** and did not turn to look at the dark, hunched figure of the ***tabibu.*** She carefully stepped over the two soldiers who had accompanied her. Their sleep was deep, because Jendayi had added a potion to their ***tshwala beer.***

Guards accompanied the dakamatapa wherever they went, so as to ensure their safety, even during courtesy visits. We had to find a way to get rid of it for a while. Jendayi had provided the solution.

Mkwayo was spending the night with one of his younger concubines. The system of rotation between wives had been established for a long time.
As they were the oldest, Katisa and Mwazwenyi were entitled to many more nights with him. Katisa knew he would rather sleep with her than with the other concubines. He had married them out of a sense of duty to the Empire, but she was the one he loved.

If all goes well, he'll never know, Katisa thought as she faded into the shadows of the night.

If all goes well…

"Has my seed become so apathetic that there's not a single ***man*** left in Amanyani?" Peyisai asked.

Hands behind his back, the young man paced the clearing in the middle of a thicket of ***jarungas.*** The lush, drooping leaves sliced through the moonlight, turning it into pale shafts of light falling across the faces of the ***ndaus*** seated on the ground before Mwazwenyi's son.

It wasn't the voice of a boy that uttered the scathing words that came out of Peyisai's mouth, but that, hoarse and guttural, of an adult. That voice was laced with contempt and disdain.

The ***ndaus*** were sure they heard Mhlanga's voice. And indeed, as the boy continued to taunt the nobles, his features seemed to harden and resemble those of an adult.

But it was not Mhlanga speaking to them. It was the Other.

“An Abamba sits on the throne, a throne I fought for. An Abamba who will now lead you south… Towards your death!

— But Mkwayo has united the Maguvurunde, objects a ndau .

His name was Mvume. He was not a dissident; he had come to this meeting more out of curiosity than anything else. Had the great Mhlanga really been reincarnated in this young child? Mvume still wasn't sure.

The ***ndau*** next to him nudged him, hoping to reduce him to the silence. Mvume ignored the advice.

“We no longer need to be constantly on our guard and live in fear of attack from other realms,” Mvume said.
And since one of them became monomatapa, the Abamba are no longer a threat. Even you could not accomplish these things… Mhlanga.

Peyisai froze and glared at Mvume. The boy's eyes seemed to catch the moonlight and reflect it back into the ***ndau's eyes.*** Then he walked straight towards Mvume. Two small hands reached out and grasped the folds of the ***ndau's cloak.*** With strength far beyond what a child his age was supposed to possess, Peyisai pulled Mvume to him, forcing him to his feet. The Other's young and old face was only inches from the ***ndau's.***

"Have you become a sheep, to let yourself be led so obediently to the slaughterhouse?" he hissed, his jaws clenched. Have you forgotten that the Abamba

have always wanted to destroy what we have built to graze their cattle in our ruins? Are you blind not to see that the barbarian who defiles my throne intends to lead you into a trap in the Highlands?

"But the Erriten… The Mashataan… The kandisa…" Mvume stammered, terrified by the power of the hands twisting his cloak at his throat.

— All participate in the illusion! shouted the Other, before throwing Mvume at earth.

The ***ndau*** groaned in pain as he landed, but said nothing more. Another ***ndau,*** whose name was Njabu, then spoke. Unlike Mvume, Njabu was committed to the dissident cause.

"If Mkwayo intends to betray us, then what can we do?" he asked. It is true that we who are gathered here this evening have never accepted the idea of being under the rule of an Abamba, even the favorite of the Thunderbird. But we are only a small minority.

If we openly take a stand against Mkwayo, few will listen to us. What can we do ?

"Kill him," said the Other.

Some ***ndaus shuddered*** at Peyisai 's brusqueness. others nodded.

"Once the barbarian is dead, then I will become a monomatapa," said the Other. And I will end this southern war before it has even started.

- But what about the heir who is before you in the order of succession? The one called Imaro? Njabu asked.

The Other spat on the ground and cursed well, using words that were more than surprising from someone who looked like a child.

"He's not my descendant," he raged. The blood of the Maguvurunde people does not flow in his veins. At least this child who serves as my cabin at the moment is of my lineage, even if he is half Abamba.

"But what can we do about this Imaro?" persisted Njabu. He will be hard to kill. He is said to be an even greater fighter than his father, who is himself the greatest warrior in all of Maguvurunde.

Peyisai looked at Njabu, who tensed in expectation of an attack similar to the one that felled Mvume. But the Other restrained himself. To answer the

Njabu's question by violence would get him nowhere.

"As you know, Imaro isn't here," he said finally. He is far to the south, and it is possible that he will die there. I am the oldest heir to the throne currently in Amanyani. If Mkwayo were to die, then I would become monomatapa. If Imaro survives what awaits him in the South, we will take care of him then. If he doesn't survive… Well, so much the better.

"When and how should we kill Mkwayo?" Njabu asked.

The Other smiled. The boy the ***ndaus*** knew could never have curl his lips into such a grin.

"We'll meet again," said the Other. At that time, I will tell you when and how. Until then, don't say anything about the ***mhondoro*** in me. In appearance, I remain Peyisai. At the time of my choice, all will learn that I am in truth Mhlanga.

The ***ndaus*** got up and left. Peyisai remained alone among the ***jarungas.***

And I'll be the only one who knows that I'm not Mhlanga, he thought, before leaving the grove in his turn, without noticing the eyes that were watching him.

Peyisai moved silently. He was following a secret trail that would lead him back to ***the imba*** where his mother was waiting for him. A vicious grin crossed his face at the thought. He knew that Mwazwenyi feared him even more than the ***ndaus.*** And the Other feasted on this fear.

Soon... Soon, I won't have to squeeze between the shadows. Soon this land will be under the yoke of the Erriten...

Too late he heard the rustle of foliage behind him. Too late too when he turned around. The handle of ***Katisa*** 's arem crashed against her skull. He fell heavily. Katisa bent down and undid the rope wrapped around her shoulder. But she had underestimated the strength of the Other.

Peyisai's hand shot up and sent the spear flying. He leapt like a leopard, aiming for his jaw to rip it apart. Katisa interposed her forearm, but her other arm caught in the rope. She struggled in silence. She knew she wouldn't get anywhere trying to reason with him. Peyisai growled like a ferocious beast and the power the Other gave to her young muscles threatened to overwhelm her. The teeth approached his throat…

Instead of trying to free her arm, Katisa used her legs and threw her opponent away. She sat up as best she could and tried to free her arm. Peyisai jumped up. She dodged, passed the rope around his

body, then knocked him to the ground. It was not easy for him to master it. The Other's strength was that of an adult, but Katisa was far beyond men in power. When it became clear that there was no point in struggling, Peyisai began to speak in the Other's foreign voice.

"It won't do you any good, woman. We will win, whatever you do.
Stop interfering and I'll save your life when I become monomatapa. Otherwise, you will die with your husband and your son.

In response, Katisa tightened the bonds. The Other then launched a series of impious curses. Katisa ripped a piece of cloth from Peyisai's garment, rolled it up into a ball, and shoved it into her mouth. Then she picked up her opponent and slung him over her shoulder. Bending down to retrieve her ***arem,*** she quickly left for the ***mhondoro temple,*** where the priestess was waiting for her.

The darkness inside the temple was relieved by thin rays of moonlight filtering through openings in the walls and by small fires of animal fat burning in clay bowls.

The smell attacked her nostrils but Katisa said nothing.

Peyisai was lying on the dais where he had stood and scared a few hours before. He was still bound and gagged, but it wasn't fear that made his eyes shine as he struggled violently to tear himself away from his bonds.

Katisa and the priestess stood near the entrance to the temple. They were talking in low voices.

“You did your part,” said the priestess. And you did your job well. But you have to go now. You are not from Maguvurunde, and your presence would harm the ritual I must perform.

She turned. The next moment, Katisa grabbed her by the shoulder and forced her violently to turn around to face him.

“My husband's fate and that of my son are at stake in this ritual. You can't ask me to stay out, not knowing how their fate will be decided. And what does it matter that I'm not one of your people?
Am I not the dakamatapa? I was hit by a Cloud Strider, and I...

"Too much pride," the priestess added. You have not yet learned what the humility is that marks those who truly know the gods.
If you are present during the ritual, my chances of banishing the Other will be reduced. Will you sacrifice Peyisai on the altar of your pride?

Katisa knew the priestess was telling the truth. It was his pride that had led him to his first exile from the Ilyassai, and it was this gesture that had set in motion the events that were now approaching their culmination.

“I'll wait on the other side of the door,” she said finally.

"As you wish," said the priestess. But remember this. Whatever you hear in the next few minutes, stay out of the temple until I tell you to come in.

Katisa nodded. Then she went out into the night. The temple, surrounded by gigantic rocks, looked like some colossal beast lurking in the darkness. She leaned against a rock, not being completely sure that it would be possible for her not to intervene.

When the priestess came to tell her to come in, Katisa rubbed her sore hands. She had gripped her ***arem*** with such force that she had almost broken the handle. The things she had heard...

Screams... Strangled screams in an unknown language... A singing, urging voice... A voice she knew belonged to the priestess...

A roaring voice that bellowed insanities, drowning out the voice of the priestess... The voice of the Other... More screaming, crying... A howl of pain from the priestess who had nearly gotten the better of Katisa's promise... A growl that had made the rock on which she was leaning tremble... A last cry from the Other... The goosebumps that had invaded her like something impure threaded their way through the stone before disappearing into the night... And finally, the thin voice of the priestess, who asked him to come…

Katisa had found her lying at the foot of the dais. She was breathing with difficulty, but her gaze was sharp and penetrating. Katisa's eyes shifted to the dais. Peyisai was motionless, still tied up. His breathing was calm and regular. His face, from which the gag had disappeared, was again that of a child. But Katisa could never again see him as an innocent child.

“You can untie it now. Between the herbs of Jendayi and my incantations, the Other is gone.

- Do you need help ? Katisa asked, worrying about the priestess.

She shook her head.

"I'll get over it," she said. Jendayi will see to it. The child will stay here tonight. His mother will pick him up in the morning.

As she uncuffed him, Katisa asked the burning question.

lips since she knew the boy was possessed.

"If the ***mchawi*** grabbed the boy during the ***mhondoro ceremony,*** how can you be sure that this hasn't happened before with other people, during other ceremonies?"

The priestess' eyes were old and haunted as she answered.

“I can't be sure.

The rope came loose and slipped from Peyisai's body. Katisa looked at him for a few moments, then his eyes fell on the priestess again.

— They say you should bring a gold prize for the rituals that take place here. I didn't bring any gold. What will my price be then?

“You'll know soon enough the price you'll have to pay,” said the priestess.

She doesn't say another word. Katisa turned and left the temple.

“Soon enough,” repeated the priestess, struggling to get to her feet.

The moon was disappearing in the sky when Katisa returned to ***Jendayi*** 's mhuri. She was still very preoccupied. She knew she couldn't hide everything that happened that night from Mkwayo. She was going to have to tell him about the ***ndau conspiracy.*** They were not going to change their plans when they learned of Peyisai's fate.

Just before entering, she froze in place. Like Imaro, she had developed a sensitivity to ***kufahuma.*** What she felt was not a presentiment. It was different.

A figure emerged from the ***mhuri.*** It wasn't Jendayi. It was Mkwayo. The monomatapa's face was frozen.

"You and I need to have a little talk," he said.

Sitting next to the sleeping Peyisai, the priestess wondered once again if she should have told Katisa what the Other had shown her just before she chased him into the underworld of the Mashataan.

She had seen a vision of Imaro… swaying, unarmed, bleeding from a dozen wounds, struggling against an enemy who was only a vague blot trying to envelop the warrior… Imaro's eyes were bright with defiance. , but the priestess saw that he was weakening…

Then the vision was gone, and the Other was gone. Peyisai was free.

“ I was right not to tell her,” the priestess decided as she watched Peyisai.

16.
THE NAGLOPA

Imaro 's kufahuma warned him that he was being followed. It was not the first time. But there, the one who was chasing him was not human. Sounds came to him: claws on the stone, scaly skin rubbing on the thorny bushes... A breath that told him that the hunter was approaching his prey... He didn't need his ***kufahuma*** to know that he wasn't. e had never faced such a creature, moving like a lion, with hissing skin like that of a snake. Imaro guessed that if the creature had wanted to, it could have approached so quietly that his ***kufahuma*** wouldn't have warned him in time.

Confident. Convinced that he can strike me down whenever he wants.

It was in the southern part of the Umbane, the mountain range that separates the Abamba Highlands from the Naama Lowlands. His passage through the peaks had been difficult, but his time in the Highlands had prepared him for the rigors he faced.

He hadn't seen a human being since he killed the sentries at Shingane Camp. He had fed on antelopes and rock rabbits which he killed with a spear. Her bracelets weren't vibrating. He could only hope that the wizard had fled to the only home he knew.

He had other things to think than Bohu for the moment. Because the predator was getting closer every second, and he was moving faster and faster.

Imaro looked right and left. The path he was on turned sharply a few paces ahead of him. He had two spears, taken from the mtatwa sentries, and he still had his sword. The bend was the perfect place for an ambush, and the space between the walls was wide enough for him to wield his weapons. He picked up the pace.

Rounding the bend, he heard his adversary force the pace. The creature

was about to attack. He smiled fiercely. ***We'll see who the prey really is,*** he told himself as the claws sounded louder.

They were few; a furtive people, forgotten and abandoned. They lived in scattered bands along the slopes of the Umbane, which were avoided by the other lowland tribes. They hunted small animals and gathered fruits, nuts and berries from the rare plants that grew on this rocky mountain soil. They lived and died in fear of being discovered, then exterminated, by the Naama.

On the slopes of the Umbane, knowledge was survival. They knew the peaks and the slopes. They knew the habits of birds and animals; they knew where the edible plants were found, the subtle nuances between each type of wind, and the moment which marked the transition from the wet season to the dry season, and vice versa. They knew when outsiders came to their land, and they knew when and where the inguluku hunted.

Hidden in the rocks, they silently watched ***the inguluku*** throw itself about the strange warrior they had been following for days…

The inguluku rounded the bend in the cliff so quickly it was impossible to make out his features. With roughly equal speed, Imaro threw his spear. He hadn't had time to aim properly, but the tip of the weapon sank deep into the predator's body.

Letting out a squeal unlike anything Imaro knew, ***the inguluku*** fell to the ground, rolled over, and straightened up.
Imaro was ready to lunge down and skewer his assailant with his other spear. But when he actually saw the animal for the first time, he was frozen in place.

If a lion could have mated with a crocodile, their offspring might have looked like an ***inguluku.*** Its jaws were bristling with sharp teeth.
His eyes sunken in their sockets looked at him from the bottom of his oblique and reptilian skull. Legs with clawed and slightly arched ends supported a feline body, powerful and muscular. Its tail was long and curvy, like a lizard's. Pale green scales covered its body. Tufts of black hair grew in spikes on his head and down his spine.

The animal was one and a half times larger than the largest lion Imaro had ever seen. But it wasn't his size and his strange appearance

which made Imaro hesitate. It was his own spear, stuck halfway into the animal's body, just behind his shoulders.

Any other beast would have been rolling on the ground trying to snap its jaws against the shaft that punctured its heart or lungs. But ***the inguluku*** remained on its feet, without wavering, its eyes burning with hatred. Its long jaws opened to make a sound that was half growl, half hiss. And while Imaro remained petrified by this spectacle, ***the inguluku tensed*** as he was about to pounce.

Imaro barely had time to level his spear and jumped back. His arms remained as hard as pillars as ***the inguluku*** threw himself straight at the spear, carrying the warrior in its tracks. Imaro found himself on the ground, the mouth and the claws of the animal a few centimeters from his face.

Imaro knew it would be impossible for him to stay away from the beast for very long. With his back to the ground, he arched his legs and placed his feet under the animal's belly. Then he pushed with all his might, pushing ***the inguluku away*** as he had pushed Ngatun away, there were many rains of that.

Man and beast quickly found themselves on their feet. ***The inguluku charged*** again, rearing up on its hind legs like a lion. Avoiding the claws that slammed into him, Imaro plunged his spear forward, piercing the animal's scaled torso, aiming for the heart. As he dodged one of the front paws, the other struck him on the shoulder, digging bloody furrows and causing him to momentarily lose his balance.

These new wounds burned Imaro like fire, as ***the inguluku's*** claws were incredibly sharp. But considering what Bohu had done to him, any pain was negligible.

Recovering his balance, the warrior leapt over the animal and ran to a place where the path was wider. His hand closed around the hilt of his sword, and he turned to face ***the inguluku.*** The animal, which nevertheless had two spears in its body, was preparing to charge. Imaro had just freed his sword from its scabbard when ***the inguluku*** reached him. The force of the impact sent the sword flying against a rock and Imaro was swept away by his opponent's titanic mass.

In the rocks that overlooked the place of the confrontation, the eyes of the spectators widened in astonishment to see that the stranger had held out for so long. But his strength and his skill had finally served him to

nothing. His battle against the mountain predator would soon be over.

"We should come to his aid," said one.

- Why ? asked another. He is an Abamba. If he sees us, he will know what we are, and he will hate us, like the others.

"But he hurt ***the inguluku,"*** insisted the first. If we help him, we we can kill the animal, and that way it won't hunt us anymore.

“With any luck, they'll kill each other.

With these words, they relapsed into their silence as the battle between the man and the ferocious beast continued.

Imaro grabs ***the inguluku*** by the throat. The superhuman strength bequeathed to him by the Cloud Strider allowed him to prevent the creature's jaws from closing on his face. But his claws gnawed at his ribs, and his whole back was lacerated by the stones on which he struggled to try to escape the heavy mass of his assailant.

In the height of desperation, Imaro removed a hand from the animal's throat, whose jaws immediately closed together, grabbed the spear handle that protruded from the animal's chest, then pulled and thrust the blade again and again, always a little further into the vital organs of the creature.

Letting out a high-pitched howl, ***the inguluku*** tore himself away from the warrior and jumped back. The handle of the spear broke and remained in Imaro's hands. He staggered to his feet and searched the path for his blade. Blood flowed from his sides, cascading in streams down his legs. He spotted his sword several paces away.

For the first time in many rains, he thanked Ajunge, the Spear-God of the Ilyassai. ***The inguluku*** was not between him and his weapon. If he could reach her in time… He advanced with heartbreaking slowness, weakened by the blood loss. One more confrontation with ***the inguluku*** would finish him off. The sword seemed to move further away with each step.

At the same time, the roar echoed in his ears. The crunching of claws on the rock crackled like a clap of thunder. His sword seemed further and further away. He wouldn't have time...

The leader of the lookouts made an abrupt decision. Under the stunned gaze of the others, he lodged a stone in his sling, straightened up, and swirled his weapon above his head. His arm suddenly relaxed and the stone flew towards ***the inguluku's head.***

The others looked at him without saying a word, then imitated him.

Imaro heard the first impact, then it was a rain of stones that fell on the animal. He heard the yelps of ***the inguluku,*** more embarrassed than hurt by the projectiles. The animal slowed down and Imaro took the opportunity to lunge at his sword. When he turned around, the rain of stones had ceased and the animal had resumed its charge. But Imaro was ready. He planted his legs firmly on the ground and braced himself, both hands gripping the hilt of his sword.

Imaro leaned forward. The animal's claws missed him by a hair's breadth. With all the strength that remained in his muscles, he drove his blade into the skull. The steel point sliced through the scales and bit ***into the inguluku's brain.***

Releasing his sword, Imaro leapt aside. Once again he found himself unarmed. If his last blow hadn't knocked ***the inguluku down,*** nothing would matter. As it sank, Imaro heard the animal hit the stone wall in its run. With immense effort, the Ilyassai managed to stay upright for a few more moments. ***The inguluku*** lay motionless.

The warrior staggered to the slain titan. He saw that his blade was halfway through the animal's skull. He reached out his hand to try to pull it out. Before he could touch the handle, the path swirled dizzily before his eyes and his legs refused to support him any longer. He collapsed across the carcass of ***the inguluku.***

Just before slipping into unconsciousness, he heard the rubbing of feet on the rock, but he had no time to see the newcomers.

Imaro opened his eyes to an azure sky lined with mountain peaks. He felt almost as weak as after suffering Bohu's ***mchawi .*** He let his eyes drop to the sky, and a face entered his field of vision. Seeing him, he made a face and struggled to try to get up, in vain.

As he examined the face further, Imaro realized he had misunderstood. It wasn't Bohu, even if the features were similar, a mixture of Naama and Abamba. He could see other heads now, men and women with similar features. On each of these faces could be read sadness and resignation.

Imaro's wounds caused him a dull, continuous pain, but he felt poultices on his ribs. ***At least they don't want me dead,*** he thought, before another thought replaced that one.

Bohu had said he was the only one of his kind; that all the other children born of the unions between Naama and Abamba had been put to death. Either Bohu

had lied… Either he knew nothing about the people of the mountains.

Do they also resemble him in spirit? Imaro wondered, before fall once again into darkness.

Imaro slipped a stone into his sling. Then he twirled it around and launched his projectile at a row of sticks lined up on a palisade outside the Naglopa village. The sticks, carefully wedged between pebbles, were widely spaced from each other. Imaro's stone broke the staff in two. He slipped in a new stone and threw again. A second stick flew away.

"Quick to recover, quick to learn," said Tshingi, leader of the Naglopa.

Imaro understood the meaning of his words, if not the words themselves. The Naglopa used a bastard dialect that borrowed from both Naama and Abamba. Imaro had learned several languages since leaving the Ilyassai, and he learned this one as quickly as slingshot.

His rib cage was wrapped in strips of thick cloth. He was recovering quickly from his injuries. The Naglopa had done more than heal him. They had dressed him in a loincloth cut from the skin of ***the inguluku*** and had threaded the animal's teeth into a leather collar around his neck.

Imaro looked at Tshingi. The chief had seen far more rain than Imaro, but there was not a trace of whiteness in his hair or goatee. Tshingi was almost as tall as he was, but he was thin, almost thin. His features were more abamba than naama, except for his fair skin tone and tufts of hair that betrayed his naama origins.

His only garment was a loincloth, similar to Imaro's. His weapons consisted of a sling and a dagger whose iron blade was almost as long as a sword. He had no jewelry, no decorations.

During Imaro's convalescence, Tshingi and the other Naglopa had told him of their origin while teaching him their language. From what Imaro understood, many Naama had violated the Erriten taboo on having sex with their Abamba slaves. Each time such a union was discovered, the parents and their eventual offspring were massacred. But some had slipped through the cracks and fled to the Lowlands to raise their children. A community of banished had thus slowly developed.

As the rains went by, the inhabitants of the Lowlands got into the habit of abandoning their mixed-race children in secret places. Under cover of darkness, the Naglopa came to rescue them and then raised them in their world of fear and concealment.

The name Naglopa had been given to them by the Naama, for whom they were more a legendary tribe than anything else. The name meant "those who run at night".

Imaro had no trouble identifying with these people, being himself a mixed-blood exile. He knew he owed his life to Tshingi, but he had never asked the chief the reason for his action. He was now ready to hear the explanation.

"Tshingi," he said calmly, trying to find the right words and put them in the right place. I am still alive. Why ?

A long silence followed. Imaro chooses not to break it. He had learned that the Naglopa spent a lot of time without talking.

"You are something new," he finally said.

Imaro didn't press him any further. He knew that Tshingi would develop his answer when necessary.

“None of us, not even the bravest, would have faced ***the inguluku*** as you did. A Naglopa would have accepted death. Not you.
It's something new.

A second silent interval followed.

“New things happen for a reason. we have you
rescued to learn more about this reason.

Imaro smiled. It was his first real smile since his duel with Bohu. During the days he had spent among the Naglopa, the spark of humanity that Bohu had nearly snuffed out forever had been rekindled.
His interest in the Naglopa was sincere. He had become friends with them when it seemed to him that nothing should count for him anymore than his revenge against Bohu.

"So you're putting the question back to me," he said.

He had then spoken at length, in a speech interspersed with long pauses as he sometimes sought his words. The Chief listened carefully as he told him about Bohu, the Erriten, and the war raging in the Highlands and on the east coast. He told her about the kandisa, the monomatapa and the rivalry between such powerful magical forces.

that they could affect the Naglopa, however cut off from the world.
And finally he told her about his own origins.

When the sun went down, Tshingi was still listening to Imaro. And he was more certain than ever that he had done the right thing when he threw his projectile at ***the inguluku.***

In his shadowy form, Bohu was an integral part of the night around him. It was still hard to believe that he was free from the prison the Erriten had locked him in the second he left Wankuza Pool.

He ran his fingers over the cauterized wound where Imaro's blade had struck. He was, however, unable to touch the places where the occult punishments of the Erriten had injured him.

He let his consciousness escape from his body and float above the rocks in the middle of which he was lying. It was in a desolate part of the Lowlands, which even the izingogo ***avoided. But not him...***

He would take revenge. He would take revenge on Imaro, if he was still alive. And he would take revenge on the Erriten.

His spirit returned to incarnate itself within the carnal limits of his body. A luminous green halo briefly surrounded his figure. A second later, he was gone.

17.
« BAETE ! »

Shingane's army occupied the entirety of the Udongaluka plain, a vast expanse which interposed itself in the succession of plateaus which rose towards the titanic mountains to the south. The ***impis*** were deployed in regular alignments. Each regiment was led by an ***induna.*** Some also by Twins. These were dressed identically to the ***nkosi.*** When the battle against the invaders from the west was about to begin, the Twins would give orders as if they were in charge of the entire army. The fighters knew where the real Shingane was, and they had learned to distinguish his voice from those of the Twins. But their adversaries did not know which of the feathered giants was the one who would decide the outcome of the battle.

The Mtatwa forces were not only invading the entire plain, they had also taken up position on the surrounding hills. If the ***impis*** of the plain were defeated, the survivors could always beat a retreat towards the fortified bastions set up above, and hold their ground until reinforcements arrived.

The scouts had reported that the Ngwika army was much larger than any the Mtatwa had faced so far, but Shingane and his ***indunas*** were confident of the outcome of the battle even without the presence of the Dark Man.

Spears upright, shields diagonally across their bodies, the warriors stood as motionless as blades of grass on a day without a breath of wind. Their dark faces, without war paint, were masks of impassiveness. But under these masks lurked fear...
Not the fear of the Ngwika, but of the Great Elephant.

A few nights before, Shingane had carried out yet another hunt for witches. The ***isangoma*** had been called because of the mysterious

assassinations of sentries in Ngundlovu. The soothsayers had sniffed out many wizards. Many others, in the height of terror, had confessed to impious acts, real or imagined, even before the ***isangoma*** approached them. But that night, something had come to eat away at the souls of those who hadn't been sniffed. An ***isangoma*** had declared Shingane to be a sorcerer, denouncing him as a demon brood, and demanding his death...

The other ***isangoma*** had fled, maddened with fear, while Shingane flayed the accuser alive. Attacking an ***isangoma*** was the most heinous crime for the Mtatwa. However, neither the gods nor the ancestors had struck down Shingan as he carried out his hideous punishment.

The warriors were faced with several choices: either ***the isangoma*** who had denounced Shingane was lying, or Shingane had become greater than the gods and ancestors worshiped by the Mtatwa. They had thought long and hard about this during practice and maneuvers.

The ***impis*** remained silent as Nkwana's warriors entered the plain from the west. They lowered their spears as one.

Unlike the warriors of Shingana, who had sacrificed their tribal and clan identity to blend into a homogeneous mass, the men who marched for Nkwana had retained their diversity. Most of the warriors were Ngwika, but many allied tribes provided sizeable contingents. Bosigos were seen there, wrapped in their blue cloaks adorned with geometric patterns, and whose shields were winged. There were Tsonga, whose already impressive height was enhanced by their pointed hairstyle. They were muscular warriors, who preferred the ax to the spear. There were also Ngwenya, who smeared their bodies with spots of red pigment before going into battle. They called these stains "spirit wounds" and they believed they diminished the consequences of actual wounds received in battle. They were armed with clubs with a much longer handle than those of the other tribes. Finally, there were the Phondo and the Themba, tribes so close to the Ngwika that they were almost part of the latter tribe. But the latter liked to adorn their bodies with particularly elaborate patterns of pearls, whereas the Ngwika went into battle almost

nus.

The warriors of each tribe marched behind their own ***nkosi.***
These had discussed the strategy with Nkwana, and had then transmitted these instructions to their warriors. Nkwana's army may not have had the uniformity of Shingan's, but it was no less disciplined. But the forces of the Mtatwa were about a third superior to those of the Ngwika and their allies. And the Mtatwa would have the advantage of fighting in territory they knew well.

The invaders formed their ranks without a single ambush or skirmish. The Great Elephant preferred gigantic carnage on the plain. On this day, Shingane was going to prove to himself that he didn't need the Dark Man to ensure victory.

Nkwana stood on the heights of a hill. He nodded in satisfaction as his warriors deployed as planned. From his vantage point, he could see the entire disposition of the mtatwa army.

For weeks, he had been studying the training Shingane favored. He had searched for hours for the loophole that would allow him to counter the tactics that had paid off for the ***nkosi*** mtatwa.
His own forces were outnumbered, and he knew that if he failed to contain Shingane's wings as they closed like pincers, the Ngwika army would be surrounded and doomed.

Solosha was at her father's side. His younger brother Gobane accompanied him. He had only undergone the rites of passage into adulthood a few rains before. It would be Gobane's first real experience on a battlefield, far from the skirmishes between clans which were more ritual than carnage.

Bengeshe was there too. She had a spear and a shield like each of the warriors, but she had no ***ubu-hlalu*** around her neck.
Observing the Mtatwa, Nkwana and the others could clearly see the gigantic warriors who paced the ranks between the ***impis.*** Nkwana had heard of the Twins from the inhabitants of the ***kraals*** near the border interviewed by his scouts. Only one of these ponderous giants was truly Shingane. But which one?

Nkwana regarda Bengeshe.
— Montre-moi le véritable Shingane, ***the cure.***

As he spoke, he avoided looking at the scars that once marked the location of her breasts. Bengeshe was as straight as a statue. Only his eyes moved, constantly moving from place to place in the mtatwa army. Other senses were examining the plain as well… Senses the warriors were unaware of.

The silence stretched uncomfortably as Bengeshe probed the impis . She felt the presence of the ***isangoma*** and she avoided them, because they too could detect the invisible. She didn't know that the ***isangoma*** were so frightened by what Shingane had done to one of their own that they would have had a hard time spotting his presence.

Finally, ***the umuti*** reached out and pointed with his spear.

"It's him," she said.

"If you're wrong, you'll die," Nkwana said, carefully examining the obese giant in the center of the formation.

"I'm not mistaken," she said.

Nkwana looked away and looked at Solosha and Gobane.

“The warriors of our clan are aiming to kill the one ***the umuti*** has designated,” he said. I take the lead. If I fall, our warriors will continue the fight. But if Shingan falls...

"The Mtatwa will be like a headless hen," Solosha said.

"And we will be the lions," said Gobane.

Nkwana nodded in satisfaction, knowing that his sons would continue the battle if he couldn't. He looked at the army assembled by him. The sun was falling right on him and, for a moment, there was no more whiteness in his hair and his muscles regained their full vigor and suppleness.

He then shouted an order, the one his warriors had been waiting for since when they had set out and left the country of the Tsubi.

— ***In the middle!***

Thirty thousand throats uttered this war cry in echo. Across the plain, fifty thousand warriors answered with the one the Highlanders had learned to fear.

— ***Bayet!***

And the battle of Udongaluka began.

From the position he was in, between the head and the right horn, Shingane taunted the invading army. For him, the Ngwika and their allies were an unruly and ragged horde, without a leader and without a strategy. They him

recalled the bands of warriors who had risen up against him at the beginning of his wars of conquest. His strength had made short work of it. By the time the other tribes took an interest in Shingane's tactics, it was already too late: his troops outnumbered any who opposed him.

Those were the Dark Man's tactics, not yours, a voice whispered from deep within him. Shingane drove away this parasitic thought.

"Put your head forward," he ordered ***the induna*** next to him. Let them sweep the front rows, and let the horns close on them then.

Striking his shield with his spear, ***the induna*** relayed Shingane's orders to the formation's center commanders. Shingane smiled in anticipation of the slaughter to come.

The warriors at the head of the formation set off at a trot, spears forward, their shields ready to hook those of their adversaries. Rows of infantry surged forward one after another and began to run with surprising speed, given the weight of their gigantic shields.

As the Mtatwa were about to make contact with their more advanced opponents, Nkwana shouted an order. In the next second, the Ngwika army split in two. Each column threw itself, not on the troops which arrived on them, but on the horns of the enemy crescent, taking them completely by surprise. The head of Shingan's army was left with no opponent to strike.

The Ngwika ceased to feign disorganization. They swept over the horns with deadly efficiency, exploiting the element of surprise to the fullest. The Mtatwa retreated in total confusion.

A furious Shingane shouted his orders, which were relayed to the head ***indunas .*** This had finally split into two formations in turn, each launching itself on the two groups attacking the horns. The rest of Shingane's army had not moved. The leading warriors had hoped to take the two halves of Nkwana's army between a rock and a hard place by taking them from the rear, but the Ngwika had prepared for this eventuality: while the front ranks attacked the horns, the last, who had run at a slower pace, turned to face the head of Shingane's army.

The two lines collided with a crash of leather shields. The Ngwika and their allies fought more fiercely than any adversary the Mtatwa had hitherto encountered. Men from both armies were dying in large numbers, and it was soon impossible to advance in either direction because of the carpet of dead. The warriors of Nkwana prayed to Udali to give victory to their companions who attacked the horns, because obviously it would not be possible to hold out for very long like this, between the head and the horns. They all knew, however, that they were shedding their blood to buy time… The time Nkwana and his sons needed to flush out and kill Shingane.

When Nkwana's army went to the horns at the start of the assault, one group fell back. This group, composed of warriors from the Galeka clan and a company of Tsonga, advanced straight towards the place where the real Shingane was. They had already seen several Twins fall. Some matched their master in size, but none in agility. Nkwana trusted what Bengeshe had said. With his sons at his side, he urged his men to press forward. Their window of time was short, as reinforcements from Shingane would arrive without delay. Nkwana knew he had to strike fast, kill Shingane, or die trying.

Shingane was dumbfounded seeing his enemies fooling the leading regiments. His astonishment gave way to mad rage when he saw how quickly his men fell under the spears of his enemies. Many months had passed since Shingane needed to use his brains, not brute force and intimidation, on a battlefield. At the start of the ***mfecane,*** the Dark Man had whispered strategies and plans of action to him. But now he was faced with a fearless enemy, an enemy led by an ***nkosi*** whose knowledge of battle tactics was at least equal to his own. And the Dark Man was gone.

Shingane suddenly saw a cluster of warriors coming in his direction. Brandishing their gigantic axes like so many stalks of bamboo, the Tsonga warriors mowed down all those in their path.
And the Ngwika who accompanied them were not left out, taking their bloody tribute.

From their determined faces, Shingan understood that they knew he was the real Great Elephant. His rage rose again.

He scanned the adversaries approaching him. He had no trouble recognizing who was their ***nkosi.*** His rage gave way to contempt. An old man. Shingane knew then what he had to do.

It was time to feed Ixwa.

The warriors surrounding Shingane hastily moved aside as the ***nkosi*** advanced into battle. Two Tsonga twirled their axes to hit him. The two hulking warriors were like two weaklings facing Shingane, but they weren't afraid.

Shingane used his shield to deflect an axe. He interrupted the race of the second with the point of Ixwa and with a twist tore the weapon from the hands of the Tsonga. Then he crushed his shield on the first warrior, knocking him to the ground. As the second Tsonga reached for his club, Ixwa bit his stomach. Groaning in pain, the warrior sagged.

An Ngwika took the place of the two Tsongas: Nyago, the son of a younger brother of Nkwana and Mkwayo. Quick with his spear, Nyago plunged it between Ixwa and the edge of Shingane's shield. The latter retaliated by raising his shield, thus trapping the young man's spear, before giving a sudden thrust forward. Unbalanced, Nyago tried to sit up. Ixwa sank sideways and back up to the rib cage. Ixwa's spike reappeared on the other side of his body, followed by a geyser of blood and Nyago's agonizing cry.

The Tsonga that Shingane had knocked out got to his knees, then dove on Shingane's shield, trying to tip it to the ground, where he would be easy prey for his companions' axes and spears. But before he could secure his hold, the ***nkosi*** 's foot slammed into his head, shattering his jaw. Le Tsonga walked away, his face shattered in his hands.

Nkwana's warriors had taken a heavy toll on the men who fought alongside Shingane. But having witnessed the prowess of the Great Elephant, Ngwika and Tsonga retreated. Shingane brandished Ixwa high above his head. Blood dripped from the barbed point.

"Where is your ***nkosi?"*** he asked in a loud voice. Is he so cowardly that to send children to fight against me?

Nkwana heard Shingane's words. They did not anger him. He knew it was his destiny to fight against the Great Elephant. The attack

surprise on the mtatwa horns had given him the time he needed to reach the position indicated by Bengeshe. Now, with single combat imminent,

Nkwana hoped to divert the Mtatwa's attention long enough for his warriors to execute the next maneuver in his battle plan. He was under no illusions. He knew he couldn't defeat Shingane. He just hoped to keep him busy.

He looked at Solosha and Gobane. They didn't say a word, but the message was clear. Then he cried out to his warriors, “If I fall, keep fighting!

With that, Nkwana brandished his spear, made sure his shield was securely fastened to his arm, and advanced down the path his warriors had steel-cut for him. When Shingane laughed upon seeing his opponent, they gritted their teeth, but remained silent.

"When it's not children, it's an old man!" scoffed the Great Elephant. Old people are useless. They are the ones we kill first when we capture a ***kraal.*** Approach, grandfather.

The faster you fight, the faster you will die!

The Ngwika and the Tsonga could no longer contain their words. As they showered Shingane with invective, they yearned to drive their spears into his mass of flesh. But they had heard Nkwana's order, and they were not going to challenge the ***nkosi.***

The Mtatwa stopped fighting in turn, and also formed a path for their leader. A smile crossed their features when they saw Nkwana come forward to oppose Shingane.

As he watched his father approach death, a spasm of hatred overwhelmed Solosha. But it wasn't directed at Shingane.

Damn you, Imaro, he thought bitterly. ***If you had accompanied me instead of going south, my father would not have had to die on this day...***

The Mashataan chastened the Erriten. The spheres suspended above the heads were dark, inert. There was no flash, no promise of power or energy creeping into their minds.

Instead, the Erriten heard the inhuman voices of their masters reciting a litany of failures and missed opportunities. The kandisa was approaching by sea. Its power was diminished, but its armada was

still powerful enough to lay siege to the city. She should have been defeated in Kitwana…

The Erriten felt the full weight of their elephantine bodies pulling them down. Human forms, however altered, were not made to support such a mass without the aid of sorcery. The Erriten suffocated in the alien flesh they had accepted while transforming.

They pleaded desperately with the Mashataan. Silence was their only response. Then, once the Erriten had resigned themselves to a slow death, the spheres lit up and an emerald glow bathed the room. And the life energy of the Great Wizards is filling up again.

They promised their masters that they would not fail. The Mashataan made them repeat this oath, then withdrew. The Erriten drank from the mchawi *which poured out of the spheres with undisguise*

18.

" YOU WILL LIVE "

Imaro was standing, arms raised, to allow Thekele, the healer of the Naglopa, to remove the bandages that surrounded his chest. There was no pain; the wounds inflicted by ***the inguluku*** had long since healed. The parallel rows of scars on the warrior's flanks were the only marks of an encounter in which he had nearly lost his life.

Thekele carefully removed the bandages, as if the wounds were fresh. On the part that had been applied against the skin, the dried residues of a paste made from plant extracts flake off and fall to the ground. The herbs had helped heal Imaro, and prevented infection.

Once the last strip was removed, Thekele muttered words incomprehensible to Imaro. She threw each strip, one by one, into a small fire. She continued her song while they were consumed.
When only ashes remained, she poured water over the smoldering remains, producing a serpentine hiss.

Thekele looked at the warrior.

"It's over," she said.

Imaro lowered his arms.

“Thank you,” he replied.

Thekele says nothing else. His gaze was impersonal; there was no pride in having succeeded in curing him.

The healer was in the prime of her life. Imaro had noticed that there weren't many old people among the Naglopa. Their stealthy lifestyle and the scarcity of food in the mountains were not ideal conditions for a long life.

The abamba side predominated in the features of Thekele, while his stature and complexion were more naama.

"Why did you do that?" he asked, gesturing to the
ashes carried by the wind.

"To kill the spirits of sickness."

She turned and walked away, her feet scraping on the rock. She hadn't said much during the healing ceremony, which didn't surprise Imaro. The Naglopa did not all trust him.

Tshingi's band had moved higher up the Umbane, as their scouts had detected signs of pursuit for several days.
Imaro turned and looked down. He saw tiny shapes, simple black dots that he had difficulty discerning.

"They're still chasing us," said Tshingi, who had replaced Thekele alongside Imaro. They've never hunted us for so long, or in such numbers.

“They're not after you,” Imaro replied. It's me.

Imaro had had time to perfect his command of the Naglopa language during his convalescence, and the chief understood what he meant.

“As long as I stay with you, they'll be after you.

He looked into Tshingi's.

“You taught me to live in these mountains,” Imaro continued. If I leave now, they'll come after me and leave you alone.

- For how long ? retorted Tshingi. Children of mixed blood are less and less numerous. And the Naama are constantly hunting us down… This was already the case before your arrival.

“Then it is time for the prey to bare its teeth to those who hunt it,” said Imaro.

Chicken brandit on the fronde.

“We have small teeth.

"Bigger than you think," Imaro said.

NCO Xbo was swearing. It was not easy to progress with his squad in these winding and often rugged mountain paths. His words were but whispers, for the Erriten had ears that carried far...to that forgotten land of

all.

He didn't understand why he and his squad had been chosen to hunt down those Naglopa tramps with a mission not to stop until they found someone who was ***n't*** a half-blood. But no-one

wouldn't have dared to refuse an order from Bohu, the Man of Darkness, who answered to no one except the Erriten.

Xbo's squad belonged to a large contingent of troops that patrolled the northern borders of Naama. News of what was happening in the South took a long time to reach this region as mountainous as it was remote, populated only by demons and the banished.

When a messenger had informed them that a significant number of the troops deployed near the border were going to return south, the hearts of all the soldiers had leaped and they had a hard time hiding their excitement. For months, the rumors about the Final War, the one where the Naama would finally fulfill their destiny, and which would mark the annihilation of those who had rejected them at the Ends of the World, these rumors, therefore, did not cease to swell.

Some soldiers were therefore going to stay in order to prevent an attack from the North. The others would leave for the South. At first, Xbo had thought that his squad would count among those returning to the South. He had prepared his men for the long march that awaited them, when Bohu had appeared, appearing out of the darkness. The officer had never seen the Dark Man. But his existence and reputation were well known throughout the Lowlands.

"I'm changing your orders," Bohu had said.

Bohu was only an indistinct silhouette and Xbo could not distinguish his features. Bohu's voice, however, sounded quite strained.

As Xbo and his men stood still, awed, Bohu conjured up an image before them: a gigantic warrior whose outlines gleamed in the darkness.

"This one runs with the Naglopa," he said. Find it. And when you found him... Kill him.

"But we were told to go south," Xbo protested. The orders came directly from the Erriten.

The non-commissioned officer couldn't see Bohu's eyes, but he felt stared at and fear crept into the depths of his being.

"Would you argue with my order?" asked the Dark Man.

"Absolutely not," Xbo replied quickly, trying not to sound shaky.

Bohu let the silence stretch for an incredibly long time. Then he gestured and two balls of greenish fire appeared at Xbo's feet. One was small, the other much larger. The ***mchawi*** crackling spheres made Xbo's hair stand on end.

The emerald light abruptly disappeared. And Xbo and his men gaped at what the moonlight was revealing to them.

Instead of the small sphere, a lens mounted on a circle of steel and iron rested on the rocks. At first glance, it looked like a classic mirror, except for glass, translucent. Xbo knew what it was, although he hadn't had the opportunity to see many of them.

"A view-from-a-far," he whispered.

Normally, such an object of ***mchawi*** would have provoked reactions of fear on the part of the soldiers. But what the large sphere contained made them react much more. At first it looked like a ball of scales glowing with the same greenish luster as the small sphere. Then the sphere opened, revealing a creature whose four arched legs and very long tail resembled those of a lizard. Its head had a sort of sharp snout and fangs. His green eyes, shining deep in his sockets, didn't leave the soldiers for a long time. The animal climbed onto the nearest rock face and stood there, sniffing the breeze.

Xbo knew that it was an ***mpau,*** a tracker, a creation of the Erriten, with an extremely developed sense of smell, and whose ability to track any creature was extraordinary. The Erriten used the ***mpau*** to find their most dangerous enemies. The warrior seen in the image conjured up by the Dark Man must have been particularly harmful if tracked down with an ***mpau.***

"You have your orders," said Bohu. And you have what you need to carry them out.

With that, the wizard vanished into thin air, leaving only a green halo that sparkled briefly, before disappearing in turn.

From his position on the cliff face, the tracker continued to watch the soldiers.

The ***mpau*** went far ahead of the squad. He came back sometimes, as if to make sure the men from Xbo were still there. Once the tracker had sniffed out Imaro's trail, Xbo used farsight to keep track of his target. They were getting closer. Xbo knew the warrior

and his companions knew they were being tracked. They had tried to sow them many times, and would have succeeded, without the ***mpau.***

Several days had passed since the Naamas had last seen the tracker. His absence was beginning to worry Xbo when, at a bend in the path, the soldiers finally saw him, but they all froze. The ***mpau*** lay motionless on the rocky path. He had been cut in half and his blood had spurted onto the surrounding stones. His mouth was wide open and his eyes stared at Xbo and his men without seeing them.

Xbo knew the death was recent, otherwise he would have already been devoured by mountain scavengers.

Did the one we're tracking do this? thought Xbo uncomfortably.

He glued the view-from-a-far to his eye and scanned the slopes and rocky escarpments. He saw nothing but stones and meager clumps of vegetation. ***A land where only the Naglopa can live.***

Then he heard a dull rumble, as if a thunderstorm was breaking in the distance. Xbo didn't need the farsight to know what it was.

- Back ! he yelled.

Panic gripped the Naamas as they backed away hastily. The rocks fell on them like gigantic predators. Screams of agony were drowned out by the crash of the avalanche.

- Now ! Imaro ordered.

The four Naglopa leaned on the sturdy wooden stick protruding from the pile of rocks. The wood almost broke, and all their efforts seemed futile when suddenly the pile tipped from the lip of the escarpment and rolled down the slope with a thunderous crash.

“You know what you have to do,” Imaro said.

The four men looked at him, nodded, then set off down the path that led down. Imaro walked over to the other pile of rocks. They had marveled at his ability to move stones so heavy that it took three Naglopa to lift one. He showed them how the mountain could be not only a refuge, but also an ally.

Armed simply with their slings, daggers and spears, the banished would have been no match for the soldiers. But no warrior could withstand the impact of these gigantic boulders that seemed to be attacking them rather than simply falling from above.

Imaro had little appeal for ranged warfare. He preferred to fight on the front lines, mowing down his enemies, setting an example in this simple, yet effective way. But his time with the ***haramia*** had taught him the value of strategy, the art of turning weakness into strength.

Tshingi and several Naglopa were waiting for him in front of the second heap of rocks. The leader's expression was more sinister than triumphant. But even so, a gleam of pride shone in his eye.

"Good job," said Imaro, arriving at Tshingi's side.

The latter nodded.

“They scamper like rats.

"But they're not all dead," said another Naglopa.

"Those who are still alive are afraid," said Imaro. fear is a weapon as formidable as these rocks.

None of the Naglopa answered. Imaro could read deep in their eyes the satisfaction of knowing that it was the Naama who were fleeing now. Imaro quickly drew up a battle plan, and Tshingi agreed after asking a few practical questions. Once the women and children were safe in the heights of the mountain, the Naglopa gathered the boulders and balanced them in the places specified by Imaro. By the time these preparations were made, the Naama had gone from tiny black dots on the horizon to silhouettes advancing cautiously on the rocky track.

Tshingi had spotted the ***mpau*** and explained to Imaro what it was. Both of them had trapped the beast and left its remains across the path as a message to the Naama. Tshingi explained that lizards like the ***mpau*** and ***the inguluku*** were common in the Lowlands.

A land of crocodiles, Imaro thought.

He looked at the surviving Naamas. They were no longer retreating. They were running.

"Now," he told the Naglopa.

And he led the banished towards the last Naamas. Abandoning their customary silence, the Naglopa howled their savage joy as they descended to attack.

Xbo was curled up on himself when the gigantic rock passed him. Only a few of his men had survived the assault. The

others were reduced to the state of bloody pulp. His own death was near; only luck had spared him.

Bohu lied, he thought bitterly. ***He said the one we were looking for was a simple warrior. But it is certain that he is also a sorcerer with the power to command the stones of the mountain to chase us...***

He suddenly realized that the assault had ceased. No more rocks rolled down the slopes. The echoes of their fall gradually died down.
Soon after, all he could hear was the sound of his own breathing, labored and hoarse with panic and exhaustion.

Some were injured, he and a few others still unharmed. Silence reigned. But all hope of escape vanished when they saw their way of retreat blocked by a wall of rocks as high and wide as a cart.

- The ! cried a soldier.

Following the man's gaze, Xbo saw a swarm of dark shapes descending the slopes. They were coming at high speed and it looked like they were clinging to the cliff walls, like ***mpau.***
Xbo saw that there were dozens of them, and saw the sparkling brilliance of their weapons.

“The Naglopa,” he whispered.

The Naama swore. Some spat on the ground. None had ever seen a Naglopa. They hated half-bloods simply because they existed. They found it hard to swallow that such enemies had been able to decimate them in this way.

“Get your guns out,” Xbo ordered.

The soldiers obeyed, drawing their swords and gripping their spears tightly. They didn't know much about the Naglopa, but it was said that the night runners were not warriors. The Naama were determined to take as many half-bloods as possible with them into death.

Suddenly, as if out of nowhere, a hail of stones fell on the soldiers. The pebbles were even more dangerous than the boulders because they arrived at such a speed that we had no time to see them, and even less to avoid them. Cowering to protect themselves as best they could, the Naama endured the storm of stones. When it ended, all the soldiers were suffering from wounds.

A voice rose, as from the heart of the Umbane.

"Drop your weapons if you want to live!"

The order had been given in naama. The message was simple and clear. The Naglopa had convinced the mountain spirits to fight for them.
And the Dark Man had abandoned them.

“Do what they ask,” Xbo said.

He was the first to get up and throw his weapons to the ground. The others followed his example. Then they waited.

A few seconds later, the Naglopa arrived at the bottom of the ravine. They were fewer than Xbo had thought. One of those approaching was more massive than the others. Xbo knew this was the man he was supposed to kill. He had failed. He knew the Dark Man was going to kill him, or worse, if he ever saw him again.

When the Naglopa reached the soldiers, Xbo saw that the half-bloods numbered a little over thirty individuals in all. Faced with enemies as lightly armed as these, the Naama could easily have carved a path of steel out of the Umbane.

But the Naglopa were not alone.

The image that Bohu had created was far from corresponding to the aura of threat that emanated from the man. Xbo understood that it was only a warrior, not a wizard, as he had believed. Yet, in his own way, he was just as fearsome as the Dark Man.

A Naglopa accompanied the stranger. Others picked up the weapons of the Naama, who made no effort to conceal their revulsion at the half-bloods.

"Bohu sent you," said the warrior.

Xbo struggled to hide his surprise at learning the Dark Man's name. The warrior's words were understandable, but he spoke the language of the South with difficulty, as if he did not master it well.

"It is," Xbo replied.

The officer saw no reason to lie. He told how Bohu
had come to them and what happened next.

"Where is he now?" Imaro asked once the commander had finished.

Xbo chuckled mirthlessly.

“He could be anywhere. He could be…here.

The Naglopa who was next to the giant blanched and looked away. But the warrior just burst out laughing.

'He's very far from here.

Xbo had nothing to say to that. He let a few seconds pass and spoke again. This time his tone was more neutral.

"You said we'd be safe if we surrendered," he said.
concealing his rage at having to beg for his life.

The Naglopa spoke at that moment, for the first time. The fleeting gleam of fear deep in his eyes was gone.

"Yes," replied the half-breed. You will survive.

He smiled… and it was Xbo's turn to know the fear.

Imaro sat on a ledge on the southernmost slopes of the Umbane. At its feet lay the Lowlands, a vast, flat land that stretched south to the sea of the Outlands. Behind him, the mountains rose like the ramparts of the gods and their summits guarded the border with the Abamba Highlands.

The mountains had nothing to do with Tamburure. And yet Imaro felt a familiarity such as he had never known in any country of Nyumbani. Here, the sky was not obscured by trees, and the land was still wild.

He would have liked to stay a little longer in the mountains, but time was running out for him to accomplish his mission and the task of the kandisa.

He had learned a lot from his brief encounter with the Naama. He knew that Bohu was far away. The bracelets hadn't tingled him since Bohu had fled. The soldiers were probably a diversion, he decided.
Bohu tried to prevent him from going south. The maneuver had failed.
Imaro wouldn't fall behind any longer.

He suddenly thought of Tanisha and Kilewo. The image that Bohu had shown her was never far from her mind. Deep inside him, an insidious voice kept asking a question he couldn't answer.

Was the vision real? Or had it been an illusion?

He remembered the feeling of reality that emanated from it, like everything that the ***mchawi had evoked.***

An illusion, he concludes. ***An illusion…***

The scraping of the skin on the stone made him turn around. He saw Tshingi approaching. The Naglopa's face was solemn, even though he had just won a victory that he and his people had considered unthinkable. But there was something new...

A Naglopa from another band had come running, informing him that a very large number of Naama had just arrived in the mountains through another border post. They far outnumbered Xbo's squad.

The Naglopa had not yet decided what they were going to do. Tshingi and the other chiefs had been discussing the matter for much of the day. Imaro had come to settle there to await their decision.

Tshingi sat down next to Imaro. They stared in silence at the Lowlands for a long time. It was a region forbidden to the Naglopa. They knew that if they ventured out of Umbane they would be killed on sight. The only times they dared venture there were when children were abandoned, and even then it was after dark, when no one could see them.

They had to choose between staying in the mountains or joining the battle to overthrow the Erriten. If successful, they would stop living in flight and concealment. In case of failure, their reward would be the dead.

Tshingi observed Imaro. The warrior held his gaze, impassive.

"We'll join you," he said.

Imaro nodded. The Naglopa were not the Ilyassai, nor the ***haramia.*** But he had taught them to be warriors, and he would be happy to go into battle with them at his side.

"We are going to leave the mountains," said Imaro, "but before that he one thing remains to be done.

Xbo and the other Naamas were desperately looking for something, anything, to use as a weapon. So far, they had only found pebbles, which was pitiful considering the dangers that awaited them.

The survivors had managed to scale a pile of rocks, behind which they had been trapped. Now they were hurrying towards the Lowlands on the rocky path. Once out of these accursed mountains, they would find refuge in the villages far from the frontiers.

Rejoining the army was out of the question. The punishment they could expect for failing the mission given to them by the Dark Man was so terrifying that they tried not to think about it.

Xbo and the others were exiles now…like the Naglopa.

Xbo cursed the name of half-bloods. And he cursed the name of the mysterious warrior who was at their head.

" You will live," the Naglopa had said. You will live as we have lived, when you banished us from the Lowlands.

The Naglopa had not only seized their weapons, but also their armor and clothing, leaving them naked and at the mercy of predators and the elements of the Umbane. Only luck had allowed them to survive these last days. Their luck was starting to run out. A scaled predator had grabbed one of the soldiers. Another had fallen from a precipice. The lack of water and food was beginning to be sorely felt.

Xbo staggered forward, struggling to keep his balance on his legs fragile. For the first time in his life, he cursed the Erriten.

19.
SOLOSHA 'S FIGHT

I'm too old to fight this man, Nkwana thought as he once again avoided Ixwa.

He knew Shingane was toying with him. His shield was lacerated by Ixwa's fangs. Blood flowed from half a dozen wounds on his arms and legs.

He could have killed me a long time ago. He plunged the tip of his spear into the empty space between Shingane's shield and Ixwa's shaft.
Shingane dodged the blow without difficulty. He might be twice as heavy as Nkwana, but he moved with incredible speed and grace, bursting into laughter as he displayed his ***nkosi*** ngwika prowess.

Twenty rains ago, he wouldn't have found the task so easy, Nkwana thought as Shingane forced him back. His back slammed into the shields of his own warriors. Younger, only his brother Mkwayo competed with him. He was still a powerful man. But in this fight, Shingane was giving him a lesson, like a father who gives a correction to his son. Nkwana and Mkwayo's fighting technique relied on physical strength. In a duel requiring agility against a stronger enemy, Nkwana found himself at a disadvantage.

Mkwayo could have beaten him, Nkwana thought as he once again dodged Ixwa. ***Imaro too.*** Nkwana fleetingly caught a glimpse of Solosha's face among those watching the fight. He quickly turned away so as not to see the anguish he saw on his son's features.

Why am I doing this?
The answer came immediately.
Because I have to...

Shingane was still smiling, his teeth gleaming like weapons. But he was getting tired of the game.

"You're going to die now, Grandfather," he said.

Nkwana's roar of laughter startled the Great Elephant.

"Come on, then, fat pig." This dance has gone on for too long. I have enough seen your rolls bouncing off your greasy flesh.

Shingane's eyes narrowed. The smile disappeared from his face. He wasn't used to being laughed at.

He dropped Ixwa and took his puzzle out of his leather belt. The club was as wide as the thigh bone of a rhinoceros. But the Great Elephant had no trouble wielding it with one hand.

Nkwana couldn't believe his eyes when Shingane charged him. It was a confrontation by definition unequal. Whoever wielded the spear always won simply because of the length of the handle. Was Shingane so full of himself that he didn't hesitate to put himself in such a disadvantageous position?

Apparently yes.

The Great Elephant brought down his club with enough force to smash the skull of a buffalo. Nkwana avoided the blow. A whole part of Shingane's body was now exposed. Nkwana lunged forward, plunging his spear into the rolls of grease that girdled his opponent's chest. With incredible speed, Shingane dodged the blow. Then he struck back with his club. The weapon broke the shaft of Nkwana's spear. Raising his shield for protection, Nkwana pulled out his own club… but too late. Shingane landed a powerful blow on Nkwana's already damaged shield. Under the impact, Nkwana's shield and arm shattered, sending the ***nkosi*** sprawling full length.

Shingane towered over Nkwana from his height, like a god of death. His cudgel rose with majestic slowness, like the elephant to which it was named raises its trunk. Nkwana's head was throbbing, as his skull had hit the ground when he fell on his back. He heard as if from afar the shouts and the clamor which rose from the battlefield. He knew the source of these cries…

They succeeded ! thought Nkwana, drunk with joy, as Shingane's club fell on him. ***I bought them the time they needed!***

- Continue the fight! he yelled at the top of his lungs, a second before his face was crushed by Shingane's club.

He never heard the cry that Solosha and Gobane gave. And the moment he died, his ancestors welcomed him.

The Ngwika and their allies had driven in the horns of the mtatwa formation. But they had suffered heavy casualties and Shingane's spearmen were coming in serried ranks, their shields interlocking. They were fresh, as the Ngwika warriors had just emerged from a violent engagement. The Mtatwa rushed forward, sure of themselves, forgetting that their adversaries were as cunning as they were brave.

The Ngwika yielded to the Mtatwa's charge, but did not flee, leaving their opponents to sink into their lines. Then, the two halves of the formation struck and began to compress their opponents, as they had done with the Tsubi. When they saw that they had once again been deceived, the Mtatwa cried out in rage, but continued the fight, goaded by fear of what Shingane would do to them if they broke ranks and fled.

On either side of the battlefield the Ngwika inflicted more damage than they received. But the Shingane reserve was still intact, to which were added the survivors of the horns. The Ngwika and their allies had no troops in reserve. Shingane had to be killed before his reserves could enter the battle.

Shingane watched the battlefield. After killing Nkwana, he had retreated to a vantage point from which he could see the progress of the fighting. When he realized the extent of the damage, he growled like an enraged lion.

“If the horn ***indunas*** are not already dead, they will die for it.

He called a group of runners to his side. They were young men with lean, gnarled bodies, trying as best they could to hide their fear of the Great Elephant. The latter barked his orders to the runners, then made them repeat his instructions. One of them spluttered. Ixwa ate. The rest of the runners repeated the message without the slightest error.

The runners rushed towards the ***indunas*** and repeated the orders. In the seconds that followed, the torso of Shingane's army split in two. Each side moved to the flanks, intending to flank their adversaries and flinch them with the

head survivors. This time the western warriors could not escape. A smile of satisfaction split Shingane's face as his warriors carried out his orders.

"The Dark Man couldn't have done better," he said.

A veil of tears blurred Solosha's vision, kneeling beside her father's body. Gobane was next to him, and kept crying.
Around them, Ngwika and Tsonga warriors fought furiously against a horde of Mtatwa who wanted to steal and desecrate the body of the enemy ***nkosi .***

The battle cries from the chest of the mtatwa army reached Solosha's ears. He knew that Shingane had enough troops in reserve to ensure his victory. ***Shingane…*** the name ignited a flame of hatred more intense than anything the young warrior had known. This hatred burned the tears from his eyes. He got up.

“What are we going to do, Solosha? asked one of the warriors who were guarding Nkwana's body.

“I'm going to kill Shingane,” Solosha said in a voice that was nothing but sheer determination.

Gobane jumped to his feet and grabbed Solosha by the arm.

- Nope ! he cried, his face streaming with tears. I lost my father today… I'm not going to lose you too!

Solosha flicked her brother away. Gobane staggered and missed to fall. His eyes widened as he looked at Solosha.

“It's our only chance. If I kill Shingane, our father will be avenged, and we will win this battle. If I fail, we'll all die anyway.

Gobane looked his brother in the eyes and saw something he had never seen there. He knew Solosha wouldn't listen to him if he tried to talk him out of going after the Great Elephant. Only once in his life had he seen a dark, inflexible resolution like that; in Imaro's eyes.

'Udali be with you… ***nkosi,*** ' Gobane said.

The two brothers clutched their wrists. Then Solosha got rid of his shield. Speed was his only chance if he hoped to beat Shingane. He had his spear in his right hand and an ax borrowed from a Tsonga in his left.

He pushed his way between the warriors while insulting the Great Elephant and challenging him to a duel at the same time.

Shingane heard a powerful voice shout his name above the din of battle. Turning his head, he saw an Ngwika of insignificant size approaching him.

"Who are you to say my name?" Shingan asked.

“I am Solosha, the son of the ***nkosi*** you just killed. I challenge you to single combat! In single combat, Great Dog!

Shingane's laugh echoed across the plain like a drum roll.

“What powerful enemies oppose me! he chuckled. First they send me a grandfather and now a child without a shield. If you wish to follow your father down the road of the dead, so be it.

Without warning, Shingane charged like a mountain of living flesh. His intention was to get it over with as quickly as possible. The warriors of the West had fought far more valiantly than the tribes he had opposed so far. Doubt gnawed at him since his enemies had not retreated after Nkwana's death. Killing the ***nkosi*** 's son would surely be enough to liquefy whatever courage remained in his adversaries.

Solosha used his ax to parry Ixwa's first blow. Then he lunged behind Shingane and slashed towards the fat man's legs.
Shingane spun on his heels and used his shield to block Solosha's spear. If Shingane hadn't moved so quickly, Solosha would have severed his calves.

Ixwa's teeth only bit into the air as Solosha airbounded out of range.

"Even for an elephant, you're slow," Solosha scoffed.

Furious, Shingane once again launched an attack... in vain.
As Solosha was fighting without a shield, Shingane was unable to use his usual tactics. But even so, his assailant should have been easy prey. But so far anyway, Shingane hadn't even scratched his opponent.

Suddenly, Solosha began to swing his ax above his head. Shingane's eyes widened.

Doesn't that idiot realize that I can easily deflect it with my shield?

Solosha struck, but with his spear. Shingane, hypnotized by the axe, barely had time to bend his head to dodge the tip, which cut deeply into his cheek. If he hadn't moved, he would have lost an eye.

The mtatwa warriors saw, in disbelief, the blood running down the face of their ***nkosi.*** No one remembered having seen the Great Elephant like this hurt.

Solosha's ax flashed and a portion of Shingane's shield flew away. Ixwa springs. Solosha had come too close; surely Ixwa was going to taste his flesh. But Ixwa missed her target. Solosha moved like a ghost; some swore that Ixwa had passed through his body as though he were immaterial, without harming him.

Solosha pinned Ixwa between his spear and axe. Then he tried to snatch the weapon from Shingane's hands. But he had been too sure of himself and had underestimated Shingane's strength.

The latter had no trouble pulling Ixwa to him. The gesture unbalanced Solosha who clutched her spear. With a speed not far from equaling that of Solosha, Shingane stamped his foot. Solosha tried desperately to avoid the impact, to no avail. He received the blow in the chest and collapsed to the ground. He heard Gobane let out a cry of horror as Shingane rose to his full height above him, Ixwa ready to strike.

"Now you die," Shingane said.

Ixwa dove towards him. Solosha rolled over, pressing his ax against his body so as not to hurt himself. Ixwa sank into the ground, where he had been a split second earlier. As Shingane struggled to extricate his weapon, Solosha leapt to his feet, reacting faster than ever, and brought his ax down on Ixwa. Before Shingane had time to interpose his shield, the blade severed the handle of his weapon.

A cry of disbelief rose from the ranks of the Mtatwa, but no one yelled louder than Shingane. Ixwa was so much a part of him that he felt like he had lost a limb. Before he thought of his club, Solosha was behind him. His ax drew two sparkling arcs.

Shingane let out two more cries. Severed knee muscles, his legs bent under his body and he tipped backwards to fall like a tree. Upon impact, the ground vibrated with shock.

The Great Elephant stared at its victor, eyes wide, mouth agape. Solosha's face was a mask of vengeful fury as he raised his ax above his head. From where he stood, Solosha seemed like a giant touching the heavens.

The ax descended. Shingane had time for a single question before dying: — Man of Darkness, where are you?

Solosha's ax cleaved the ridges of flesh that dotted Shingane's throat. His neck was so thick he had to try three times before his head rolled from the shoulders in a pool of blood.

Solosha picked up her spear. He drove the spike into the base of his foe's neck, skewering the Great Elephant's head, and brandished his sinister trophy skyward, raining down a shower of blood on his head and shoulders.

The Ngwika and their allies let out a roar of triumph and threw themselves on the Mtatwa with renewed fury. The warriors who were around Shingane at the time of his death began to shout, “The Great Elephant is dead! and threw down their weapons. The cry spread across the battlefield and was echoed by other soldiers. "The Great Elephant is dead!" »

The Mtatwa dropped their weapons. They laughed, and cried, and cried out in delight under the stunned gazes of their adversaries.
The officers ordered an end to the fighting.

On the hills, the Mtatwa in reserve had witnessed the duel, and when Shingane collapsed, they were the first to speak the heart of all the soldiers' thoughts: “The Elephant is dead! We are free ! Free! »

The invaders saw their opponents dropping their weapons, running down the hills. Some approached the Ngwika and threw themselves into their arms. Solosha could have given the signal for the massacre. He didn't. He was in the center of a concentration of Ngwika, Tsonga and Mtatwa who were all celebrating the death of Shingane. The head was still stuck on its spear, but Solosha no longer had the strength to wield it.

His face was unreadable.

The Solosha who had insisted on accompanying Imaro to find Bohu had disappeared. Part of that Solosha had died in tsubi territory, when he saw the terrible pain etched into Nomvula's face as she absorbed Imaro's wounds. His father's death had been a

additional step. Not much remained of the exuberant young man who had organized ***Imaro*** 's embizweni.

The new Solosha was taking shape. He was looking for answers to questions that could not be asked.

I'm nkosi ***now,*** he thought. ***I have to start behaving like one.***

"Gobane!" he called, in a voice that split the cries of joy.

Gobane ran up, looking at his brother with admiration tinged with respect.

“Find someone who can speak for the Mtatwa and bring him to me. Also bring a runner. Our uncle in Amanyani must be informed of this victory.

“Yes, ***nkosi,*** ” he replied, before turning around.

“Wait,” Solosha said, and Gobane turned around again. than a guard watches Bengeshe. I'll talk to him when I'm done with the Mtatwa.

— Oui, ***nkosi.***

Solosha watched him walk away and disappear into the crowd of cheering warriors. Gobane had also changed. He was no longer a boy wondering what it was like to be a man. He no longer needed to ask himself the question.

Solosha brandished her spear and turned it so that Shingane's face looked up at hers. He tried to read a message in the glassy eyes of the Great Elephant. He saw nothing but death.

“May your ancestors punish you,” Solosha whispered to the man who had killed her father.

And that's what they did.

Solosha and Bengeshe stood over Nkwana's corpse.
Solosha watched the umuti. ***Bengeshe looked down.***

" ***Didn't you hear me?" Solosha asked.***

Bengeshe looked up. Do not say anything.

" ***I'll say it another time, then," Solosha growled. Bring my father back to life, like you did for Imaro.***

' ***It's impossible. Imaro was not dead. Your father yes.***

“ ***Then extract the death in him and pass it into my body. It's him who must lead the warriors against the Naama. I'm not ready…***

" ***Would you die to bring your father back to life so he could do what you think you can't do?"***

— Exactly.

" *It cannot be done," said Bengeshe. If I do, you and your father will be dead. Who will lead the warriors in this case? Goban?*

Solosha looked at her. His eyes were like two hollow sockets.

" *Free your father's spirit,* nkosi, *" Bengeshe said. You've already proven that you can take his place.*

Looking at her, Solosha raised his spear…and plunged it into Nkwana's stomach, cutting a large wound so that his father's spirit could quickly depart to rejoin his ancestors. He turned to Bengeshe and raised the spear again.

" *You want to kill me," said* the umuti calmly. *But you need me.*

Solosha lowered her spear. Tears furrowed the bloodstains that smeared his face as he began a long moan, which was soon echoed by those of the other Ngwika who had survived the battle.

Bengeshe left Solosha alone with his grief.

20.
RECKONING

So the ***mfecane*** is over, and my brother is dead, Mkwayo said in a dull voice.

The Ngwika courier nodded solemnly in confirmation. The man looked like a Galeka but Mkwayo did not know him. He had stayed away from his people longer than he thought.

- What's your name ? Mkwayo suddenly asked.

— Gebebi, ***king.***

"Is your father Madolwana?" replied Mkwayo, without noticing that the man had given him his old title. If so, you honor it.

“Yes, ***nkosi.*** I am his fourth son.

He wasn't even born when the Amanyani captured me, Mkwayo thought.

— Madolwana was a very good friend of mine. He served Nkwana well. I know you will serve Solosha just as well.

“I already serve it, ***nkosi.***

Solosha... Your burden will be heavy on your shoulders. He came too early for you… Nkwana. Nkwana… How I will miss you, my brother. Why did you have to die?

Mkwayo held back his grief. He would give her free rein later, when he and Katisa were alone.

“So it was Solosha who killed Shingane. I would have liked to see that. Kind of like watching a leopard take down a buffalo.

"Why wasn't Imaro there?" Katisa said, speaking for the first time.

Gwebi looked at the dakamatapa. She looked morose and kept her distance from Mkwayo. Solosha had given only a brief account of what had happened at the

Wankuza Basin. Mkwayo and Katisa's expressions changed when they learned the result of the confrontation between Imaro and Bohu.

Nomvula… Mkwayo had known her parents too. …and

Imaro headed south to settle his accounts once and for all
all with Bohu, concludes Gwebi.

"Does Solosha find Imaro guilty of Nkwana's death?" Mkwayo asked.

Gwebi hesitated before answering. He knew Solosha well and had done his initiation with Gobane. Solosha hadn't ***said*** he held Imaro guilty. Even so...

"I think so," said Gwebi.

"If Imaro hadn't chased Bohu, Bohu would have been in Udongaluka, and then you might all be dead!" Katisa snapped.

“Our son doesn't need us to come to his defense,” Mkwayo said calmly.

Katisa swallowed her anger and looked away. Their relationship had been strained since the Other had been exorcised from Peyisai's body. For the first time since many rains, he hadn't come to join her on her couch.

Mkwayo turned to Gwebi.

"Rest now, ***izizalwana,*** " he said. Tomorrow I'll give you a message to take to Solosha.

"Thank you, ***nkosi,*** " the weary runner said happily.

After he left, Mkwayo looked at Katisa, then he left too, without saying a word.

The next day at dawn, messengers from the monomatapa appeared in front of the ***ndaus.*** Some nobles lived within the compound of Mji Amanyani. Others had chosen the countryside. For the most part, the tenor of the message was simple: the monomatapa wanted to hold a council at noon.
But eight of them were awakened at the point of a spear...

When the people saw the ***ndaus*** coming, they understood that their long wait for news from the Highlands was behind them.
When the eight ***ndaus*** at the stops passed in front of them, the tongues went well. It was well known that these eight had never agreed to be under the control of an Abamba.

The ***ndaus*** were led into the central courtyard of ***the imba.*** Their stools were already arranged in concentric semi-circles facing the pedestal

on which sat the monomatapa and the dakamatapa. Msipo and Pomphis were at their side. The presence of the latter caused a certain agitation among those of the ***ndaus*** who attached major importance to protocol.

Mkwayo and Katisa had put on their ceremonial clothes, indicating that the meeting was important. Eight stools were empty, and the ***ndaus*** ' apprehensions only grew when the monomatapa inaugurated the council without bothering to wait for those absent.

"A messenger brought us news from the Highlands," Mkwayo said.

The ***ndaus*** already knew. The arrival of Gwebi had not passed unnoticed. What the nobles did not know was the tenor of the message.

"The Tsubi and the Mtatwa have been defeated," continued the monomatapa. The The way is therefore free to walk south to Naama.

The ***ndaus*** had noticed the lack of triumph in Mkwayo's voice, and they took care to have only measured reactions.

“My brother, Nkwana, was killed by the ***nkosi*** mtatwa Shingane, called the 'Great Elephant'. But Nkwana's son, Solosha, killed Shingane, and he became ***nkosi*** instead of my brother. I sent the runner back to the Highlands, asking Solosha to wait for our arrival.

He paused. A flicker of irony crossed his face.

"It seems that the Mtatwa did not hold the Great Elephant in high esteem," he said. The courier said that when Shingane fell, all his warriors surrendered, and now they desire to join us in the war against Naama.

One of the ***ndaus*** spoke at this time, expressing the feelings of the many nobles who knew well the deep ties that bound the monomatapa to his brother.

“Before we get in working order, O monomatapa, we must organize a mourning ceremony worthy of the name for Nkwana…

- Nope ! Mkwayo snapped. My brother wouldn't have wanted us to be late because of him. I will mourn him. My people in the South, the Ngwika, will mourn him. You, my people of the North, other tasks await you. Preparations are made. The wait is over. Now is the time to take action.

The rest of the council was devoted to the details of the massive march that was to come and the role that each ***ndau*** would play in this maneuver of a

unprecedented magnitude. No one mentioned the eight empty stools.

The courtyard was finally left deserted except for the two monarchs, Msipo and Pomphis, the latter having contributed greatly to the preparations and logistics of the march.

"I must ask you to leave, my friend," Mkwayo said to the Bambuti. This what will happen next is not intended for foreign ears.

"As you wish," Pomphis murmured politely.

Although his curiosity was piqued, the Bambuti decided not to try to change the mood of the monarch. Once Pomphis left, the monomatapa turned to Msipo and said three words to him: — Bring them here.

The ***mtekwa*** got up and went into the yard, his face stern, accompanied by several soldiers.

Now alone except for their guard, Katisa and Mkwayo stared at each other.

"The ***ndaus,*** I can understand," Katisa said bitterly. But why her?

Mkwayo didn't answer.

Mwazwenyi was locked up in her apartments. Guards were posted at the entrance, the same ones who had informed her of her confinement. She had dismissed her attendants a long time ago and only Peyisai was in the room with her. Her son refused to look at her, and even more to speak to her.

The young woman's eyes roamed the walls of what was now her prison. The granite bricks formed elaborate patterns.
The carpets were decorated, sandstone sculptures were placed on small wall niches. Mwazwenyi was proud of her quarters. Now she wondered if this was her last day in ***the imba…*** Her thoughts turned to Katisa.

She had lied! She had promised not to tell Mkwayo, but she had!

She fought a new wave of despair as she awaited the inevitable order to appear before the monomatapa.

The ***ndaus*** who had conspired with the Other sat uncomfortably on their stools in the courtyard of the monomatapa. Soldiers surrounded them, their faces as hard as the leather of their armor. The monomatapa stared at them for what seemed like an eternity, sizing them up with his black eyes…and he found they weren't up to it.

Each ***ndau*** reacted differently. Some fidgeted and refused to meet his gaze. Others, on the contrary, were looking for him, trying to detect a trace of pity. In vain. Only one remained defiant: Njabu, who had hated all Abamba since the day his father had died in a slave uprising.

The dakamatapa was always at her husband's side. His hands, crossed on his knees, betrayed the tension that his face hid. The ***ndaus*** didn't need to see that face to know that she despised them just as much as her husband.

"I should have you all executed at sunrise," the monomatapa said finally.

- Then do it ! cried Njabu. Do it and be cursed, dog of Abamba!

To the astonishment of the other ***ndaus,*** Mkwayo did not order his soldiers to disembowel Njabu. Instead, the monomatapa put a hand across his forehead and sighed, looking sad and weary.

“We Amanyani have a role to play in the biggest conflict ever in Nyumbani,” he said. And all you think about is your hatred of many for the actions of a few. Tell me, Njabu: do you really believe that Peyisai was possessed by the spirit of Mhlanga?

- But of course !

"And do you think Mhlanga would have wanted you to kill me at a time when the Naama struck the Nyumbani?" Is this how a great chef thinks?

- Bullshit! answered Njabu. I don't believe in this fable. All I know is that that stool you're sitting on is stained with your Abamba filth.

"You didn't say that when I unified Maguvurunde into one single empire, and that I have concluded peace between your people and the Abamba.

“That's because I was too far away for you to hear.

Mkwayo regarded Njabu with a mirthless smile. Njabu stared at him, but his arrogance had less intensity.

“Suppose I can prove to you that Peyisai was possessed, not by Mhlanga, but by a demon raised by the Erriten,” Mkwayo challenged. What would you say, in this case?

— Of the naama sorcery in a ***mhondoro*** temple ? Are you crazy, Abamba ?

"Would you believe it if you heard it from the boy's mother?"

Taken aback, Njabu said nothing.

“Bring her,” Mkwayo ordered the guards.

One of them nodded and left. Mkwayo turned to Njabu.

"Would you believe a woman of the nobility if the word of an Abamba means nothing to you?"

"You must have tortured her...

“The monomatapa would never do such a thing, and you know it well.
Katisa intervened.

She hadn't spoken loudly, but her voice slashed Njabu like a whip. He had always feared the Ilyassai, because she was neither Maguvurunde nor Abamba and therefore, for him, unfathomable.

Mkwayo says nothing more before Mwazwenyi is led into the yard. Despite the humiliation she knew she had to endure, she held her head high. For a long moment, she stared at Katisa, her narrow eyes full of contempt. Then she turned to Mkwayo.

“Tell them,” ordered the monomatapa.

Mwazwenyi turned and faced the conspirators. In a calm, collected voice, she explained everything that had happened with her son, ending her story by saying that she was happy that the Other no longer lived in Peyisai.

"Do you understand now?" Mkwayo asked the conspirators when she had finished her story. Shaken, the ***ndaus*** nodded…all but one.

— Sure?

Njabu raises his head and looks at Mwazwenyi and not Mkwayo.

"Is it really the truth?" he asked.

His tone seemed like imploring him to say that was not the case;
that she had been forced to say all this, that she had been threatened, tortured...

"Yes, my friend, it is the truth," she said sadly. If we had continued to listen to the thing that possessed my son, you would have betrayed the Amanyani, as I did.

Njabu shook his head slowly and said nothing more.

"Are you done with me?" Mwazwenyi asked the monomatapa.

- Yes.

The question had a double meaning. The answer too.

She looked back at Katisa.

"You betrayed me," she said.

His expression reflected bitterness, disdain… and also resignation.

Katisa didn't answer, but Mkwayo did for her.

“She didn't betray you. She didn't need to. I learned from those who ruled before me. My eyes and my ears are everywhere, just like those of the monomatapa who preceded me. Did you think you could plot without my being informed? Do you think, all of you, that I am only a simple barbarian?

Mwazwenyi looked one last time at Mkwayo and Katisa, then sank into resignation.

“Take her back to her quarters.

Escorted by two soldiers, Mwazwenyi left the room. One of the ***ndaus*** looked at Mkwayo. His name was Mashama, and the monomatapa had never had reason to doubt his loyalty.

"What are you going to do with us?" Execute us?

- For reasons of imbecility? Mkwayo commented. For having listened to the words of individuals like Njabu who only have common sense on the days when they remember to take their heads with them when they go out? There are more reasons to have you executed than I can count, but I have only one reason not to have you killed.

A hope of saving life came to illuminate the faces of the ***ndaus*** at except that of Njabu.

"We are at war with the Naama, not with each other," the monomatapa said gravely, as if addressing children. You all command warriors who must take part in this war. If I have you executed, their loyalty would no longer be assured. I can't afford to have soldiers without being sure of them.

He broke off, to be certain that the next sentence would have a impact maximal.

“But I can't afford to let you lead your troops,” he said. It would be like going into battle with knives in my back. You will participate in the war against the Naama… as infantry.

The ***ndaus*** ' hopes faded from their faces for a moment, to be replaced by outrage, and fear. All were in their prime or older. Only young men could hope to survive

a campaign as infantry. On the back of a ***mbizi*** or a ***chipimbere,*** their chances would have been better. Walk…

They started to protest. The monomatapa cut them off.

“You have a choice,” he said, his voice relentless. Serve in the army as infantry or be executed within the hour.

— More… You dictate them… Mashama protests.

“I said it would be against me to kill you. I never said that I wouldn't if it was necessary. Choose ! Now !

“We'll do as you ask,” Mashama said.

— Et toi, Njabu? ask Mkwoyo.

The ***ndau*** nodded in agreement. But there was a cold, calculating gleam deep in his eyes, which Mkwayo did not fail to spot.

'Don't think you'll be fighting with your own men. Your soldiers will be distributed among the troops of the other ***ndaus.*** You will be under the orders of loyal ***ndaus ,*** who will not have their ears sensitive to any idea of treachery.

Survive the war in the South, and I will allow you to return to your rank. Hopefully, you'll have more wisdom then. And if you die in battle, at least you will have died with honor.

The ***ndaus,*** including Njabu, assured the monomatapa that they accepted the terms of what he imposed on them. He allowed them to leave, unescorted. They were shaken to have understood that the power of the ***mchawi was*** exerted even in the heart of Maguvurunde. This factor alone had been enough for them to renew their allegiance to the monomatapa. However, they should be watched closely.

Mkwayo turns to Katisa.

"What are you going to do about Mwazwenyi and Peyisai?" she asked.

"I'm going to send them to Ingombe Ilede," he replied.

The realm he just mentioned was as remote as it was tiny. Being sent there meant a divorce for Mwazwenyi, and a loss of inheritance for Peyisai.

"You should have told me what was going on," he said.

"You know very well not. I had given my word to Mwazwenyi.

Mkwayo understood Katisa's untenable position. Both remained tribesmen, despite the adjustments they had to make.

by settling within the walls of a city. They were bound by the word given, and it was inconceivable for them to betray that word.

“If you had broken your oath to Mwazwenyi, it would have been for the good of the empire, Katisa. This fully justified it.

"The empire," Katisa repeated absently.

She got up and left the yard. Mkwayo found himself alone with his guards, who heard everything and said nothing.

As Katisa brooded over her dark thoughts in her chambers, a servant cautiously approached her.

“There's a guard outside,” she said. Mwazwenyi and Peyisai are with him. She wants to see you, alone. Peyisai will wait outside.

"Let her in," Katisa said.

She rose to welcome Mwazwenyi.

"Thank you for not betraying me," said the latter.

His voice was flat, his eyes lifeless. Hatred, pride, terror... Everything that had made his personality was gone. She was just an empty shell.

“You didn't come here just to tell me that.

— Non.

Pain, again. A new fall into an abyss where the sensations were not welcome. Katisa waited patiently.

"Peyisai refuses to come with me to Ingombe Ilede," she said abruptly. He has not forgiven me for leading him to the temple and letting the Other possess him. He wants to stay with you, because you are the one who saved him from the Other. He... He hates me.

Katisa stood dumbfounded for a moment. She hadn't expected this.

"Mkwayo said he sent you both," she reminded him.

— I spoke with the monomatapa through messengers, said Mwazwenyi. He says Peyisai can stay…if you want him.

Suddenly, the words of the ***mhondoro*** priestess echoed in the mind of Katisa: “You will know soon enough the price you will have to pay”.

Is that the price? Katisa wondered. ***Another woman's son to raise as my own, just like me I couldn't raise Imaro.***

"I'll take it," she said.

Mwazwenyi expressed no gratitude. She just called her son. He opened the door and his gaze passed from one woman to another.

"He's yours now," Mwazwenyi said without the slightest emotion.

As she turned to take her leave, she saw Peyisai running towards Katisa and sticking to her, hugging the young woman with all her strength, in tears.

Mwazwenyi did not turn around a second time.

The kandisa meditated alone in the throne room that had once been occupied by Majnun, then the Erriten, and now her. Her white robe enveloped her like a shroud. The sheen of her golden hair was less than it had been.

Her mind wandered north and she watched the battle on the Udongaluka Plain, but she couldn't stay long enough to know who the victor was. She ventured south, approaching the Naama as close as she dared. She saw the defeat, and the entrenchment, of the last Erriten.

His spirit returned to his body and his eyes were clear again. She remained motionless.

" ***We've won some insignificant victories," she whispered softly, though there was no one in the room to hear her. The decisive battle will be fought in Naama.***

She sighed like a woman three times her age.

" ***I'm not strong enough," she said. But Imaro must be. He must...***

21.

HEADQUARTERS

The Battle of Naama almost ended before it started. The Erriten, remembering what the kandisa had done to gain the siege of Mlongo, stirred up a titanic wave which came crashing down on the armada as the ships came within sight of the city.

Some sailors had quivered with fear when they saw the ground swell. Others had looked at the ***Khaiyah,*** certain that the kandisa would save them once more. But the rumors of his extremely weak state had made the rounds of sailors and soldiers. And in fact, no one had seen her since the ships left Kitwana. Those who believed the rumors clung to the railings and prepared to die.

Suddenly a beam of golden light shot out from the cabin of the ***Khaiyah.*** The warriors roared a mighty cheer. But those with keen eyesight had not joined them: the light of the kandisa was not as bright, not as strong as it had been in Mlongo.

The light spread over the waters, which began to swirl, but the ships remained perfectly still. Then it began to rise, lifting the water with it until it formed a wall of light and water equal in height to the ground swell.

The wall of the kandisa advanced to meet the wave of Erriten. The two masses met in a titanic clash. The crew covered their ears, struggling to keep their balance on the deck of ships that suddenly rocked under their feet. Some did not succeed and were thrown overboard.

Screams of triumph and relief rose from the armada as the mist that had resulted from the shock began to slowly descend. But the screams soon died down. They knew they had a city to take. A town of wizards...

The capital of Naama consisted of two parts. The Cité Haute crowned a plateau perched in the heights. His arrows looked like gigantic fangs trying to bite the sky. They were a green reminiscent of ***mchawi.*** The Cité Basse stretched out at the foot of the plateau, as if subservient to its sister in the heights. Its buildings were rectangular and without much originality, because the Lower City existed for only one thing: to support the Erriten.

The armada was smaller than that which had sailed on Mlongo.
Many ships had sunk in the meantime. Only a few rare Axumite ships were still there. Ras Amayehu soldiers who had survived the attack on the Erriten in Kitwana were among them.

The kandisa had assured the other monarchs that she could counter the ***mchawi*** of the black-hulled ships, should these ever reappear.
But they were nowhere in sight.

From the city, the Naama had witnessed the destruction of the ground swell of the Erriten by the kandisa. It was the first time the Naama had seen the Great Wizards defeated. As they busied themselves with siege preparations, they began to cast questioning glances at the dark plateau that dominated their lives, and had dominated the lives of generations of people before them.

"They failed," whispered fearful voices as the mist
fell on them like a delicate rain.

- Calm down! hissed other voices. They may hear you...

The voices died down. But the Naama were beginning to get used to a concept that had remained completely unknown to them until then: the Erriten were not all-powerful.

On the deck of the ***Khaiyah,*** two Cushite commanders were deep in argument. One was Rakhma, the other a young man who had just earned his stripes. It was the youngest, whose name was Sebesh, who was the most vehement.

"I don't see why we don't attack now," he said.
The city is open, not the slightest defense. It would be so easy...

- Easy ? Listen to me, Sebesh... You must never underestimate the Erriten. Even if we don't see one of their ships, it's still possible that they've set a trap for us in the harbor. Didn't you learn anything from what happened in Mlongo?

“I learned that the kandisa can neutralize the ***mchawi*** of the Erriten.

The young man's features were drawn. The rigors of war had dug premature furrows at the corners of his lips and around his eyes.

The mist covered the armor like dew. Tiny droplets dotted the decks and rigging, sparkling like so many jewels before gradually disappearing under Jua's rays.

If only the Erriten could disappear like this, he thought.

"Rakhma…"

"I hear you, Sebesh," the commander said. I know the kandisa can oppose the unholy sorcery of the Erriten. But only she can tell when and where to strike. She will spring into action when she is ready. And ***we*** will act when it is ready. It's understood ?

I'm ready right now, Sebesh thought. But he regretted his words and nodded briefly in agreement.

The kandisa emerged from her cabin at this precise moment. By now, the crew was used to the mantle of golden light that enveloped her when she used her ***tawa.*** They also noticed that the brightness was less vivid. His cloak of light was threadbare.

She may die, Sebesh thought. ***May it be consumed from within before this war is over...***

Another realization imposed itself on him.

Without it, how can we prevail?

Suddenly he felt sad, tired.

"We attack, Ha-Nala?" he asked impulsively.

"No," replied the kandisa. We defend ourselves.

The room was streaked with lightning as the Erriten unleashed all the ***mchawi*** from their spheres. Forgotten the atrocious sufferings which had been theirs when the spheres were black.

Without their robes, the Erriten directed the energy beams shooting from their tendrils toward a round opening that gaped like a dark mouth hollowed out of the flagstones of the floor. The ***mchawi*** flowed in a bright green stream through the conduit that had been dug into the mountainside there was an incalculable number of rains.

The conduit descended vertically to the level of the Lower City, where it formed a bend and ran along a horizontal line that passed under the city itself. A few meters from the port, the conduit split into

dozens of pipes, each leading to an opening at the bottom of the port.

The water that normally filled the pipes was vaporized by the intense heat of the ***mchawi.*** A green glow suddenly erupted from all openings, before rising rapidly and hurtling towards the invading fleet.

- Looked ! cried Sebesh, in a strangled tone, violently pulling Rakhma by the arm.

His cry of alarm reverberated through the entire armada as green cylinders sprang everywhere from the depths of the sea. their minds forever.

All eyes turned to the kandisa. The light around him had taken on its usual spherical shape. She was already beginning to levitate, but the process was terribly slow. Meanwhile, emerald cylinders crossed above the ships, eventually forming a mesh that enveloped the entire armada. Once the structure was completed, the canvas began to contract.

Soldiers from the Five Kingdoms howled at a score of gods as the net tightened. But even as they struggled not to panic, they knew that if they were to survive, their gods would act through kandisa. The light that enveloped it began to expand. But she didn't attack the cylinders as she had before. Her strength was declining and she dared not empty her reserves on a riposte that was not sure to work.

The light of the kandisa expands until it envelops the whole armada. When she came into contact with the green web, the latter evaporated. The cry of exultation that rose from the ships broke clean as the web re-formed, inches above the kandisa's glowing shield. She could push it away, but it was impossible for her to dispel it.
The besiegers had become besieged...and the armada's food and water supplies would be depleted long before the city's.

Despair won over the invaders. It appeared that they had no traveled to the Outlands only to die slowly.

"What do we do now?" Sebesh asked Rakhma.

“We're waiting,” he replied, watching the play of light in the sky.

- What ? To starve? Or thirst?

Rakhma turned to look at Sebesh, and for a moment the young man thought the lion mask had come to life. Sebesh wanted to stammer an apology. Rakhma interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

“Remember our role, Sebesh,” he said. We are here to divert the attention of our enemies until our Maguvurunde allies attack from the land.

“But we don't even know if they'll really come to help us, or even if they'll be able to make their way through these barbaric lands we've heard about.

Rakhma's gaze changed. His eyes no longer seemed to shine like those of a lion. He was back to being a man wearing a mask.

“You're right,” he admitted. We don't know what happened in Maguvurunde, or in the Abamba Highlands. Even the kandisa doesn't know. All she can do is buy some time...and we can just hope the monomatapa and Imaro do what we think they're capable of.

"And also that the Erriten don't have any other surprises in store for us," Sebesh added.

“Pray Atun that you are right,” Rakhma replied sadly. Inside her sphere, the kandisa drew a little more from the reserves of ***tawa*** accumulated since her departure from the Cush. She had no doubt that she could hold her shield against the Erriten web. She felt that they too were weakening. She was sure she could counter any new onslaught.
But the situation they found themselves in could not last.

So much hinged on the battle in the Highlands. The kandisa cursed herself for not having been able to stay long enough in her ethereal form to know the outcome of the battle between the Ngwika and the Mtatwa. If she had known, she could have acted and disposed of her troops effectively. She felt that the ***chephet*** trembled like a branch beaten by the winds. She knew that her last resort was the same as that of the Erriten: to break the barrier that separated the world from the deities of the Nyumbani.
Solution that would mean the end of his world.

Knowing that paralyzed her, unlike, she was sure, the Erriten.

Sweat beaded on her body and she frowned, trying to maintain his ***tawa.*** Even so, she kept in touch with her ancestors.

So much rests on Imaro and his father, she tells them. ***And I won't know if they succeeded or failed until after the fact.***

You knew who his father was… Why didn't you tell him? asked the ancestors.

I couldn't. You know I couldn't!

His ancestors remained silent after that. Tears mingled with perspiration on the kandisa's face as she fended off another attack from the Erriten web.

The streets of the Lower City were clogged with a silent crowd thronging to complete urgent tasks. Between massive buildings, devoid of any ornamentation, weaponsmiths piled their wares on carts bound for the plain north of the Erriten plateau. Food vendors loaded melons, dried meats and jars of millet gruel onto their carts.

The faces of the merchants reflected grim anger, for the Erriten had refused to pay the supplies demanded for the army encamped on the plain. But their protests remained silent. They knew, like generations of merchants before them, the consequences of dissension...

Sobbing women said goodbye to their mobilized husbands, sons and brothers. Some would remain to defend the city; others were to be sent north to join the defenders on the plain.

The amber-skinned Naama made up the majority of the inhabitants of the Lower City. They were the ones who suffered the most from the impatience of the iridescent-eyed acolytes overseeing the defense preparations. There was also a significant number of Abamba slaves. It was to the latter that the most grueling tasks were entrusted. The Abamba were the target of the frustrations that ordinary Naama dared not direct at the acolytes, and the cracking of whips was a common noise in the Lower City.

Hundreds of rains of subjugation had made the Abamba stoic and malleable individuals. They took the blows and bullying without really reacting.

From time to time, however, some slaves looked in the direction of the port, with its gold and emerald colored coruscations. A glimmer of hope lit up their dark eyes whenever gold seemed

prevail over green. And when their gaze went to the Upper City, it was momentarily hateful.

The Abamba took great care not to let their masters read what shone deep in their eyes. They were so focused on masking their emotions that they didn't realize that their masters, too, were looking at the harbor with hope and the Upper City with contempt and hatred.

The Erriten continued to pour power into the giant web, but their minds remained free to move. That's how they knew what the kandisa didn't know: that Shingane had been defeated. The ***mfecane*** was over. Monomatapa forces marched through the mountains.

Had it not been for this army on the march, the Erriten could have sent ships, soldiers, and cast spells into the harbor to confront the armies of the kandisa. But now they needed their forces to defend the Upper City from men from the North. And therefore, the Erriten could do little but immobilize the armada until the end of the land battle.

Their strategy would have been different had they not sent their black ships to Kitwana. Chibenguela, First of the Erriten, knew that the others were blaming him for the loss of the ships. Chilaka, the Second, and his rival for hundreds of rains, had suggested leaving a few ships behind, in case the kandisa won at Mlongo. Chibenguela had greeted the suggestion with scathing contempt.

Chibenguela now felt that Chilaka's eyes never left him, even bathed in the ***mchawi. You'll never be First,*** thought Chibenguela disdainfully, carefully hiding his thoughts from the other Erriten. ***We will win this conflict and I will remain First, or we will lose it and all perish. Whatever the outcome, you will never be anything but Second.***

Chibenguela realized he was considering the idea of a defeat, for the first time. So much depended on the one who had not undergone the Change, and those who did not know his real name called Bohu. Chibenguela knew he was free. But he didn't know his intentions, now that the Erriten no longer controlled him.

In a flash of green, Bohu appeared in the Erriten Palace. The building was not guarded because fear was the most effective sentinel. Keeping his camouflage in place, Bohu moved through the corridors undetected. He had seen the ***mchawi*** mesh on the port and knew that the Erriten

mobilized all their faculties to neutralize the kandisa. ***And even if they saw me, what could they do?*** he thought mockingly. He quickly reached his destination: a room in the heart of the palace. He had shown this coin to Imaro, in a vision, at the Wankuza basin…

When Majnun and his army reached Mlongo, he had known for a long time that the kingdom had been cleansed of the presence of the Na Some survivors cheered as he entered the city. Others looked at him with blank eyes.

Among this reduced population were Kitwanians and the wounded who had fallen behind when the kandisa fleet had sailed south. Cushites, Puntians, Engaruku, Azanians, as well as some Axumites.

He was a particularly brooding Majnun who sat on his makeshift throne in a room that still smelled of seawater and Erriten. Rabir stood in front of him.

" ***Give me a ship and I'll sail south to help the kandisa," he said.***

The sight of the sea had revived the captain. He yearned to have a boat like an imprisoned man yearns to possess a wife.

" ***I will not only give you a ship," said Majnun, "but also accompany you.***

The two men shook hands.

22.
MEETING

The southern mountains stretched skyward on either side of the monomatapa's army. For the Maguvurunde soldiers, it was as if they were buried alive. For the Abamba warriors at their side, the Umbane was the grandfather of all the hills in which their people had lived for thousands of rains.

The Abamba formed the vanguard of the column, under the command of Solosha. They were unfamiliar with the country leading into the Lowlands, but they knew the mountain scenery well enough to avoid any danger of an avalanche. The Mtatwa who had joined their ranks proved particularly useful. Their homeland was near, and warriors sometimes slipped away to the heights to test their manhood. Such fighters made excellent scouts.

Behind the Abamba marched the imperial army. The ***chipimbere*** maneuvered with difficulty along the walls, and the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** carefully avoided the scree across the way. Many riders were forced to walk alongside their mounts, under the good-natured jeers of the infantrymen. The riders' responses were rarely polite.

Eight ***ndaus*** were part of the infantry, sweating blood and water under their heavy equipment. The conspirators sometimes thought that the monomatapa had not been lenient in sparing their lives.

Mkwayo and Katisa rode in the center of the Maguvurunde column. The sun reflected off the image of the Thunderbird embedded in Mkwayo's armor plate. Katisa was also in combat gear, the only woman so equipped. Those who were with the stewardship would not take part in the clashes.

It was quickly pointed out to the soldiers who objected to her presence that Katisa had been the leader of the ***Mpunia*** bandits when she had arrived in Maguvurunde. The dakamatapa, on the other hand, cared about Peyisai, who had been more than unhappy to stay behind, in Mji Amanyani. He would have to deal with her displeasure when she returned.

The army was closing in on the Lowlands. Soon, they would be out of the mountains and would consider themselves lucky to have emerged unscathed from this terrain they knew little about, unlike those who watched them...

These had clothes that went well with the gray and brown of the mountains. They made no sound as they positioned themselves vertically above the endless column of soldiers. Their masters had contacted them in their encampment at the foot of the Umbane and the orders whispered in their ears by the Erriten acolytes were explicit.

The Naama posted on the border were not in sufficient numbers to defeat the invaders. Their task was to slow down, disrupt, and demoralize their opponents, so that they would become easier prey for what awaited them in the Lowlands.

They silently nocked their arrows and drew their bows just as silently. The invaders had not spotted them. It would be like aiming for targets in practice.

And while they focused on their opponents, the Naama did not realize that they, too, were being watched...

A moan from above alerted the Abamba warriors in the vanguard. Raising their heads, they saw a body roll down the cliff and crash down close to Solosha, startling him. Looking at the corpse, it looked like someone had just smashed a melon with a club.

Other corps followed, some crashing into soldiers who could not get away quickly enough, others ahead of the ***mbizi*** and ***chipimbere.***

Seconds later, a shower of arrows fell on the army, but the shot was far from accurate and only a few arrows sank into their targets. The warriors quickly brandished their shields, round or oval depending on their affiliation. More arrows fell, shattering wood, leather and metal. Bodies crashed onto the runway leaving a trail of blood in the air.

The sounds of a battle in the heights came to float to the ears of the invaders. But they could do no more than protect themselves, await the outcome of this confrontation, and prepare for what would happen next.

"In the name of the Thunderbird, what's going on up there?" wondered Mkwayo while trying to protect his head and calm his ***mbizi.***

He didn't expect an answer to his question. Pomphis, on the other hand, ventured out of the protection of the shields to examine one of the corpses. He saw a man of average height, dressed in a camouflage suit imitating the landscape of the mountains. Its amber-colored skin and hair indicated that it was a Naama. He had been slaughtered.

Pomphis was the only one of the invading army to have ever seen a Naama, and he had almost lost his life there, since this Naama was an Erriten.

This one, at least, ***isn't one,*** the grateful Bambuti thinks to himself.

"It's a Naama," he explained to Mkwayo after returning under the shield protection.

"So far north?" asked the monomatapa shaking his head of disbelief. How could they know we were coming?

"With everything that's happened over the last rain, that kind of anything still surprises you? asked Pomphis.

"Perhaps I shouldn't be surprised," Mkwayo conceded. Either way, we're fighting over our heads. The Naama are our enemies… But then who are they fighting against?

Pomphis was about to answer, but Katisa cut him off.

"Who do you think it is, Pomphis?" she asked.

The Bambuti looked her straight in the eye.

“We'll find out soon enough. Listen… The noises are decreasing.

It had been a few seconds since no arrow, no corpse, had fallen, and the sounds of struggle had ceased.

Soldiers and warriors carefully raised their heads, pulled their shields aside. And several cries of surprise were uttered simultaneously.

- Look !

- I can not believe it !

Other heads lifted. The soldiers widened their eyes, stunned by the sight before them. Black silhouettes descended

downhill at such speed that it was hard to believe they could find crevices and holds to secure their descent.

“Get ready,” ordered the monomatapa. We don't know if they are enemies or allies.

"They are friends," said Pomphis.
- How do you know ? Katisa asked.

For all answer, Pomphis contented himself with pointing a finger at one of the silhouettes, which descended taking more precautions than the others, and was therefore in the background. Even from a distance, you could see that this man was more massive than the others.

Katisa's eyes widened, then narrowed. She whispered a name under her breath. Mkwayo did not hear. Pomphis, yes, and he nodded in confirmation.

"How did you know?" Katisa asked again.

An enigmatic smile was Pomphis' only response.

When the Naglopa reached the bottom of the cliff, they stood still until Imaro arrived. The descent was particularly difficult for him, he who had been brought up on the Tamburure and its immense flat expanses.

Tshingi was there when he finally hit the ground. A deep respect could be read in the chief's eyes when he looked at the warrior. He knew the effects mountains could have on those who hadn't spent most of their lives climbing rock faces.

"So many people," murmured Tshingi, looking at the monomatapa's army.
A veritable colony of ants.

A slight smile curved Imaro's lips. The more he absorbed the Naglopa language, the more he enjoyed listening to Tshingi. Imaro remembered his very similar reaction the first time he had seen a city.

Imaro saw Mkwayo, Katisa and others approaching him. He saw the small silhouette of Pomphis. The Bambuti really trotted to keep up with them. Seeing them didn't do him much. His time among the Naglopa had restored his tolerance for human company, and he had really taken a liking to Tshingi, even if he didn't show it.

But the appreciation for the friendship acquired through contact with Pomphis, the sense of belonging felt by reuniting with his father and his mother, and the serenity gained by obtaining the answer to the questions that had haunted him since his birth… Of all these things, there was almost nothing left.

Bohu had destroyed the Imaro who was beginning to accept himself as he really was. Imaro's goal now was to destroy Bohu and the Erriten as he had been destroyed. If he survived the death of his opponents, he would be at peace with himself.

Until then...

"We are about to join the ants," Imaro announced to Tshingi.

The monomatapa soldiers watched the Naglopa curiously, intrigued by their features. The newcomers were armed with slings, as well as spears and long iron daggers, stained with blood.

Katisa and Mkwayo slowed down as they approached Imaro. They felt that he was different, that there was now a distance between them and him. It showed in his eyes, in his bearing. It was as if the rest of humanity had become ghostly to him, beings you could see but not touch.

Pomphis recognized this change. He was hurt by it. But he had anticipated it.

At least he seems to care about these half-breeds who accompany him. His humanity has not completely disappeared.

"I see you, my son," Mkwayo said, holding out his hand.

After a brief hesitation, Imaro grabbed her wrists.

"I see you too, father," he said.

Katisa hugged him. His fingers ran along the scars on his sides.

“You've been hurt,” she said, speaking in Ilyassai. Who did this ? God?

"No," Imaro replied in the same language. It was a larger animal than Ngatun the lion. If all the Ilyassai were to kill an ***inguluku*** to prove their manhood, there wouldn't be many men left in the tribe.

"But Bohu hurt you in a different way," Katisa said. Solosha told me.

Imaro did not answer. The distance in his eyes widened.

It was as if he was looking at Katisa without seeing her.

Imaro then observed Pomphis. It had almost rained since he had said goodbye to the Bambuti, to Mji-Amanyani. It was their longest separation since they met, in the forest surrounding the City of Madness. Pomphis had been a mentor, guide, and confidant on Imaro's long journey of self-discovery.

But that Imaro no longer existed. And he wondered if Pomphis knew from the start what would be the end of the journey…

He held out his hand to the pygmy. Pomphis hugged her tightly. They looked on, neither wanting to be the first to speak.

"What did you learn, Imaro?" Pomphis finally asked.

"More than you might imagine," Imaro replied cryptically.

Mkwayo intervened then.

"Who are your friends, Imaro?" And why are they fighting on our side?

Imaro beckoned Tshingi forward. Mkwayo, monarch of an empire so vast that it took a month's walk to cross it, gauged the leader of a band of bandits. To his credit, Tshingi did not show his uneasiness at being scrutinized in this way by Mkwayo.

In the meantime, Imaro explained how the Naglopa had helped him during his fight against ***the inguluku,*** Mkwayo interrupted him to thank Tshingi for saving Imaro's life. Imaro translated the monomatapa's words of thanks, which Tshingi accepted with dignity.

Imaro told Mkwayo how he convinced the bands of Naglopa to unite and join the battle against the Erriten. These were the source of the Naama's hatred for half-bloods. The Naglopa had followed the Naama troops to the ambush site. They had slipped silently above the warriors, before slaughtering them to the very last.

"We will be your eyes and ears," said the chief. No need to fear another ambush until you reach the Lowlands.
We would like to fight alongside you when we arrive, if you allow us.

Mkwayo silently counted the warriors of the Naglopa contingent. They were a few dozen at most. But their lack of equipment and their low number were largely compensated by their qualities as scouts.

"Allow it?" said Mkwayo. Not only do I allow it, but I would be honored if you would join us.

As Imaro translated his father's words, the smile that appeared on the chief's face was like bright sunshine. He and his people were no longer outcasts. They had become the allies of a powerful king.

And this king was clearly an Abamba, even though many of those he led into battle were not. It would be their abamba heritage, and

non naama, who would be the source of their revenge mission, thought Tshingi with satisfaction. He turned to explain the situation to the other Naglopa. Imaro saw joy light up their features, but he was unable to share their enthusiasm. Then a voice came from behind him.

“So, ***izizalwana,*** you're not dead yet.

Imaro turned and saw Solosha.

As ***nkosi*** of the Ngwika, Solosha marched at the head of the long column of Abamba warriors. During the battle in the mountains, only a few of the Naamas posted in ambush had fallen near the vanguard of the troops. Solosha had returned to the center of the formation to discuss with Mkwayo.

When he saw Imaro, various conflicting emotions arose within him. All the grief that had surrounded Nkwana's death came flooding back, and he tried to quell the torrent that threatened to overwhelm him. All the rage he felt for Imaro rippled through him. He suppressed his bitterness simply because Mkwayo, Imaro's father, was Nkwana's brother. And Solosha respected Mkwayo.

"Where's Nkwana?" Imaro asked.

- He is dead.

An infinite pain was hidden behind this laconic response.

"Shingane killed him?"

- Yes. Then I killed Shingane. Now, songs about me call me the “Elephant Killer”.

Imaro was not surprised that Solosha defeated Shingane. He knew that his ***izizalwana*** had always underestimated his warrior prowess.

"Did you kill Bohu?" Solosha asked.

'No, I lost track of him.

"Then your stalking was useless," Solosha said, letting out some of her bitterness. If you had been with us in Udongaluka…

“Don't talk like that, Solosha! interjected Mkwayo, who was standing nearby. If Imaro hadn't come this far, he wouldn't have encountered the Naglopa, and the Naama ambush would have succeeded.

Solosha was silent for a few seconds. He looked at neither Imaro nor Mkwayo.

"You're right," he finally said.

Then his eyes met Imaro's. And Imaro saw that the Solosha who had become close to him by the time they arrived at the pool of

Wankuza was no more. Solosha even looked a little more like her now.

“You make it hard for anyone to want to love you, ***izizalwana,*** ” Solosha said calmly.

Then he turned and walked back to his warriors.

In the bay, the Cushites and their allies gazed apprehensively at the green web that meshed the sky. She was floating a little closer to the ships now. The tallest masts almost touched the glowing filaments.

The kandisa's shield was darker than ever. In some places it looked like it was going to tear, like an old piece of cloth. The shield was still holding strong, but it was evident that it was weakening, while the web grew stronger and stronger.

" ***We're just going to stay here until we're wiped out?" Sebesh asked.***

" ***What else can we do?" Rakhma replied, in a neutral voice, as he tried to quell the doubt that Sebesh had no qualms about voicing out loud.***

" ***I have a plan," Sebesh said.***

And as he listened to the young man's words, Rakhma's mood moved from resignation to hope.

23.
THE LOWLANDS _

The monomatapa's army crossed the Umbane without further incident. The Naama wanted to attack them again, but their ambush was foiled by the Naglopa long before their opponents could fire the first arrow.

Imaro was not with the Naglopa, who had gone on reconnaissance. He was with his parents and Pomphis. Mkwayo had lent him a helmet and cuirass which, like Mkwayo's, bore the Thunderbird emblem. The soldiers of the empire called him "benematapa", a title which he accepted without saying a word. He noticed that some seemed unhappy to see the Thunderbird on his breastplate.

One night, when the army had halted in the shadow of the gigantic peaks of Umbane, Katisa told Imaro what had happened with Mwazwenyi and Peyisai. She did not mention telling the latter that Imaro did not want his father's throne.

"Are you going to raise Peyisai like your son?"

— I gave my word to Mwazwenyi.

Imaro was silent for a few seconds. Her face, bathed in the glow orange from the flames, did not reveal his thoughts.

“You can't raise him in the Ilyassai tradition,” he said finally.

"How could I?" It was ***your*** fate. It won't be your brother's.

“Your brother,” repeated Imaro.

He had met Peyisai during his brief stay in Mji Amanyani, but the hatred that emanated from Mwazwenyi had prevented him from paying any real attention to the boy.

'When I was with the Ilyassai, I hoped that my people would recognize me for what I was. But when they finally did, it was too late; I could no longer live among them. Now I have more

members in my family that it is possible for me to count them, whether among the Amanyani or among the Ngwika. And I wonder if blood means anything except to spill it.

It was Katisa's turn to remain silent.

“Peyisai will take my place, won't she? he suddenly asked.

Katisa looked at him harshly.

“You are an unusual person, Imaro,” she said, one of the few people in all of Nyumbani who has the power to decide for herself where her place should be.

With that, she straightened up and headed back to the tent she shared with Mkwayo. Imaro sat for some time by the fire. Then he lay down and stretched to sleep.

Pomphis was lying nearby, pretending to be asleep. He had heard the whole conversation.

By all the gods, let's hope he decides his place is among us, he implored silently.

As men began to believe the world was a series of sky-splitting peaks and boulders cracked with narrow passages, the descent came to an end. Quicker than it seemed possible, the mountains turned into small hills, which in turn became the great plain that was called the "Low Lands", and which stretched as far as the eye could see like a green carpet, punctuated of the few red and yellow spots of the flowering trees.

There was no trace of habitation. We wouldn't see any for several more days of walking, according to the Naglopa. According to legends passed down from generation to generation, the Naglopa knew that the capital of the Naama was located in the lands of the Reaches, surrounded by a series of villages and cultivated fields. There were also territories reserved for the Abamba. The Naama were not interested in the stretch of land that separated the Umbane from the borders of their country.

If there were no humans there, the land was far from uninhabited. From the mountains, the invaders had seen small creatures moving stealthily. They had also heard the characteristic hissing roar of ***the inguluku,*** fortunately from a respectable distance. Even such a terrifying animal did not like to stick around an army tens of thousands strong.

In the Lowlands, however, wildlife behaved differently.
Even though the animals kept well away, they remained in plain sight. Observing the animals, the inhabitants of the North began to realize the difference that existed between the Lowlands and the other regions of Nyumbani…

There were a multitude of herbivores. But it was not the antelope, the buffalo and the savannah rhinoceros. The predominant animals were reptiles, most of which were bipedal. Their size varied, ranging from creatures as small as chickens to behemoths larger than elephants.

The most common of these reptiles was slightly larger than an ostrich. Except for its long, tapering tail and a pair of front legs that dangled above the ground, the long-legged creatures were quite akin to the gigantic birds that scurried across the plains of Nyumbani. The Naglopa called them ***imbona.***

Most predators walked on four legs. Mkwayo and the others saw their first ***inguluku.*** He was busy killing a rhinoceros. In a few moments, ***the inguluku*** had reduced his adversary to lint, the white of his bones already visible.

"Did you kill one of those with your bare hands?" Mkwayo asked.
“The Naglopa helped me,” Imaro admitted. But I finished it with my weapons: two spears and a sword.
Mkwayo remembered the scars that stitched Imaro's sides, now concealed by the breastplate. And his respect for his son's prowess grew.

The other major Lowland predator was an animal the size of a large leopard. It was recognizable by the shiny green scales that covered it and by its long tail like that of a lizard. The Naglopa called ***it shendi.***

Towards the end of the first week's march in the Lowlands, the commanders of the vast army joined Mkwayo and Katisa in enjoying a roast ***imbana .*** Tshingi and Pomphis had also been invited.
Imaro sat next to his father and mother.
"Is there nothing in this country that has hooves, hair, or horns?" the monomatapa wondered aloud, punctuating the question with a swig of ***tshwala beer.***

“From what I've read in Meroe's library, the creatures living in this region were changed long ago by the Mashataan, and the magic of the Erriten keeps that change going, while the Surveyors of the Clouds chased the Mashataan.

"Animals are like that all the way to the city," said Tshingi, "which Imaro translated.

"Are we here to discuss local wildlife or strategy?" Msipo demands.

The ***mtekwa*** had stayed behind during the journey through the mountains, which was hardly like him, and he looked very angry. Mkwayo looked at him casually. Msipo's chubby face was frozen in a mask of anger, though he was careful to show his deference to the monomatapa.

Msipo was a longtime friend. He had been the first of the ***ndaus*** to encourage Mkwayo's efforts to reunite and pacify the warring kingdoms of Maguvurunde. Mkwayo trusted her with the same trust he trusted Katisa.

"What's on your heart?" Mkwayo asked calmly.

"Can't you see we're heading straight for a trap?" replied Msipo. Yes, there are many of us and this plain is uninhabited. But we don't know what awaits us. It is the citadel of the Erriten. Their ***mchawi*** is powerful, and we don't have any magic.

"The ***tawa*** of the kandisa will neutralize the power of the Erriten," Pomphis said.

"How can you be sure?" We don't even know if she arrived at Naama. The only thing that binds us to her is… you.

So there we are, Pomphis thought darkly.

Msipo had taken a dislike to the Bambuti ever since they had first met in a village on the border between Maguvurunde and the arid hills that led to Kitwana. The closer the Bambuti had come to the monomatapa, the more this enmity had grown stronger, but the ***mtekwa*** had managed to contain his true feelings towards the pygmy… Until now.

“Are you questioning my loyalty? asked Pomphis point-blank.

Mkwayo intervened before Msipo could respond.

- Enough ! cried the monomatapa.

He was pissed off and dissension was the last thing his army needed as their goal got closer.

“I didn't doubt his loyalty,” Msipo said, addressing the monomatapa more than Pomphis. I'm just saying that we have no way of knowing if the Cushites are indeed besieging the Naama. If not, then we'll be in serious trouble when we get there.

“The kandisa will do what she said she would do,” Pomphis said calmly.

'But how can you know…' Msipo began, angrily.

"I have said enough!" Mkwayo thundered.

Pomphis and Msipo fell silent immediately.

“When I agreed to lead our forces south, I didn't know if the kandisa would be able to carry out their objective,” the monomatapa said.
I decided to bet she would make it, based on what Pomphis and Imaro had told me of her abilities. It was a risk then, and it's still a risk now. All of us here agreed that the greatest danger was not to act. Do we still agree on this point?

Mkwayo's eyes searched those of every ***mtekwa*** and ***nkosi,*** Solosha included. All nodded to signify their acceptance of what the monomatapa had just said, and their loyalty to him.

Imaro could feel the power that emanated from his father: the power to lead, to inspire, to make men willing to sacrifice their lives for him. He was beginning to understand how Mkwayo had united the peoples of the Highlands and Maguvurunde. Their admiration for Mkwayo transcended their infighting.

When Mkwayo looked at Imaro, there was a different message, more personal, in his eyes.

Learn from this, my son, he seemed to say. ***learn, so that you are ready to take my place if I were to fall in battle...***

Then his gaze returned to Msipo and Pomphis.

“You said the right thing, Msipo. We should try to find out if the siege has started and, if so, how effective it is.

"We could send scouts," Msipo said. I would be happy to lead such an expedition, if the Naglopa would guide me.

"Excellent idea, Msipo," said the monomatapa. We can continue to progress at our own pace and let you get ahead. Imaro,

would you mind asking Tshingi if he would be ready to assign a few men to this mission?

Imaro soon obtained his agreement and it was decided that Msipo would leave the following day. The rest of the evening passed without incident. When the ***nkosi*** and ***mtekwa*** rose to return to their men, Mkwayo called Imaro.

“I would like to talk to you, face to face.

Imaro said nothing.

The two warriors remained silent for a moment, as the fire reduced to embers. In the glow, the silhouettes of Mkwayo and Imaro looked nearly identical.

"Your stay with the Ngwikas didn't go well," Mkwayo said finally.

“No, but it wasn't their fault. They welcomed me, initially, as you said, then there was Nomvula… and the death of Nkwana. Solosha blames me for those two deaths.

Mkwayo made no comment.

"Do you also hold me responsible?" Imaro asked.

Mkwayo remained silent for so long that Imaro almost mistook his silence for an affirmation. When he finally spoke, it sounded like he was telling an old legend, more like revealing something about himself that even Katisa didn't know.

“When I was about to become a man, I was frightened by one aspect of the initiation rites. I want to talk about circumcision. It wasn't so much the pain as what people expected of me. I have always been stronger than my companions at the same age. At ten rains, I already had the strength of an adult. I was the son of an ***nkosi,*** so more was expected of me.

“I was the youngest. Nkwana, my older brother, should logically have been the future ***nkosi,*** but already people were saying that I would be a better warrior… I had such a weight on my shoulders… and I started to be afraid of not being up to it , to be cowardly during the ceremony, and disgrace my ancestors.

A week before the circumcision, I was sitting in the hills, alone with my fear, which was growing every day. Nkwana came to me.
We talked, and I ended up telling him about my fear.

If Nkwana had been jealous of me, he would have gone back to Galeka and told everyone what a coward I was. But my brother was not like that,

being already wise. He made me a suggestion. He suggested that I fill a cup with water and put it on my head at the time of the circumcision.
If I focused on the cup, keeping it balanced and not a drop of water spilling, then there would be no room for fear in my mind.

I obviously found the idea strange, but thinking about it, I understood. During the ceremony, I thought only of this cup. Not a drop fell and everything went well. My courage was applauded.
Only Nkwana and I knew the truth. And you now.

He looked at Imaro for a long time.

— If I'm telling you this, it's because I want you to know how important Nkwana is to me. We were adults when our father died. Logically, it is the eldest who becomes ***nkosi.*** But Nkwana suggested to the elders that it be me. Some were against it, saying it was ***my conini,*** not ***umetsho,*** that the ancestors would be furious…

Nkwana finally prevailed, explaining to them that I was a better warrior and better leader of men than him. Even after my capture by the Amanyani, he did not take the title of ***nkosi,*** although he assumed the role and the obligations. It wasn't until I finally became a monomatapa that he finally resolved to accept his inheritance.

Imaro watched Mkwayo with the greatest interest, drinking in the elder's words.

“Yes, Solosha blames you for her father's death. But he forgets that Nkwana had a choice. He could have allowed Solosha to duel with Shingane. He underestimated his fighting skills, and he decided alone to oppose the Great Elephant.

"I don't hold you responsible for my brother's death. You only did what you had to do, and if I were to hold you accountable, then the blame would be on me as well because I wasn't in Udongaluka either, and I might have been able to avoid the death of Nkwana if I had been present.

Imaro lowered his head.

"I'm glad to know you don't blame me," he said.

He then looked at his father, and his face was vulnerable.

“One day, maybe I'll stop accusing myself.

Mkwayo put a hand on his son's shoulder and squeezed it so hard that everything another would have groaned in pain.

“Let this be the day, my son.

But he couldn't be sure that Imaro would hear those words.

Much later, Imaro was lying in his tent. He had spoken further with Mkwayo but the content of their remarks had nothing to do with their personal feelings.

Why did he tell me about his initiation? Imaro wondered. The Ilyassai and the other tribes of the Tamburure did not attach any particular significance to circumcision. It was not a public, ceremonial act, but private, and done quickly. ***The olmaiyo,*** the ritual lion hunt, was when the courage of young Ilyassai was tested.

Perhaps Bohu is my true initiation. Am I really not the least bit afraid of the pain he can inflict on me? Am I really sure he was lying when he said Tanisha and Kilewo were still alive?

What will be my cup of water when I find myself face to face with him?

He heard footsteps outside. He recognized the sounds and opened the flap of his tent to let Pomphis in.

"I thought you weren't sleeping," said the latter.

Imaro did not answer. Pomphis sat down on the ground, outside the

attempted.

“You've been distant since we reconnected, Imaro. Yet we have a lot to say to each other. I have to ask you this: are we still friends?

"My friends are dying," Imaro said. They either die or turn away from me. You never turned away from me. Does that mean you have to die?

"Imaro… what happened to you?" asked Pomphis.

The warrior sighed… then told Pomphis everything he had been through since their parting in Mji-Amanyani.

Bohu strode along the empty corridors of the Erriten palace. He knew every passage, nook and cranny of the vast building, where he had spent much of his childhood.

He found neither servants nor guards. The Erriten weren't the type to have it. Almost mechanically, he shrouded himself in a shroud of darkness so his masters couldn't detect him. He knew they were focused on their battle against the kandisa, but best to tread carefully.

He stopped in front of the door of a dungeon. Its two occupants cowered and backed away, frozen with fear and wide-eyed.

" ***You're going to come with me," said Bohu.***

24.

UNDER THE CANVAS

Night had fallen on the Naama. The stars were reduced to sparkling spikes beneath the Erriten's web and the kandisa's shield. On the bridge of the ***Khaiyah,*** Sebesh faced Rakhma. The young man was naked except for a loincloth and a sword belt. About twenty Cushites, dressed identically, waited behind him. A similar scene was unfolding on a good part of the ships of the armada.

"I don't know how you managed to get me into this," Rakhma said. If Ha-Nala didn't have more pressing concerns, she would never have allowed it.

'It's because she's so busy that we have to take the risk,' retorted Sebesh. Her ebony body was bathed in waves of green and gold. Rakhma knew that Sebesh's plan had only a slim chance of working. It was, however, exactly the kind of bet he could have taken before he adopted the lion mask and accepted the responsibilities of his new status.

If Sebesh and his men were successful, the armada's chances of capturing the Naama would be greatly increased, allowing the kandisa to save some of her ***tawa.*** We saw more and more his silhouette inside his envelope of light.

"It's time," Sebesh said.

He waved to one of the crew, who summoned another from halfway up the flagship's mast. He lit a torch and waved it three times in front of him. The signal was relayed throughout the armada.

"Atun be with you, Sebesh," Rakhma said.

Sebesh jumped overboard, careful to avoid the barrier of spears erected in anticipation of a possible attack from the ***unthlatu.*** His volunteers followed him. Splashes echoed through the entire armada. Rakhma

hoped the sentries patrolling the docks hadn't heard or been alarmed.

What are a few more splashes? he thought.

"Atun be with you," he said aloud.

Beneath his lion mask, his eyes narrowed in doubt.

The dark, warm waters concealed the swimmers. The depths were partially illuminated by the underwater portion of the canvas. A slight hiss of water and warm currents signaled to them the columns through which flowed the ***mchawi.*** They knew that if they touched the canvas, it was immediate death.

There were, however, meshes large enough to let a man through. Sebesh's sword hung by his side. It was not easy to maneuver like this, but there was no question of entering the city unarmed. Around him, the swimmers were only dark spots silhouetted against a darkness even thicker than night.

I would not have thought the water would be so hot. And where the canvas is open, it will be even more so.

He felt that the others were hesitant, that they were waiting to see him act before taking action. He cursed himself for not having taken in more air before diving and rushed towards the canvas. The others followed him.

Nuab-tsho leaned wearily on his harpoon. His eyes scanned the harbor more mechanically than anything else. The Masters' web was still there, trapping the invaders' ships. The tightening of the net was so slow that the only way to gauge its progress was to watch after letting a while pass. A great way to distract yourself when you're forced to be sentry.

In less than a day, the ships will be in pieces. One wonders why the Masters need guys like me to guard the harbor under these conditions.

Nuab-tsho was young. He was well built and powerful for a Naama. Among the Abamba, he would have had the effect of a weakling. But to him, the Abamba were nothing but big fat brutes.

He was dying to leave town. He wanted to go north with the rest of the army to fight the invaders who, it was said, were coming from the Umbane mountains. But in Naama, no one opposed the will of the Erriten. When the Masters had chosen Nuab-tsho's squad to stand guard on the pier, he and his men had

accepted their instructions without showing their displeasure. The Masters were said to be able to read people's minds. Although he wasn't sure if that was true, he made sure his thoughts remained as unimpeachable as possible.

He heard the distant, muffled echo of a lapping.

A wave, he told himself, before thinking of something else.

Sebesh had almost turned around just before going through the opening. ***The heat…*** it was as if he was about to swim in a pot of boiling water. He closed his eyes and took off. When he opened them, he saw that the end of his sheath was very close to a green filament. But there was no contact and Sebesh quickly moved away.

He was safe, but… the others?

Ignoring his aching lungs, he remained suspended in midwater. He soon spotted a first shape, then another, and yet another, like a school of fish. ***Here they are !*** He exulted. At that moment, a Cushite misjudged the distances and touched one of the webbing filaments. A green glow immediately covered his body, hiding him from Sebesh's horrified gaze. When the bright glow disappeared, only a cloud of glistening ash remained, which gradually dispersed into the water.

- Look ! one of the ***Khaiyah*** men shouted.

A hundred heads snapped up, including Rakhma's. What they saw made them groan in concern. The sphere of the kandisa descended. His shield was almost completely transparent. The web of Erriten was beginning to cross the ***tawa.***

- Even if the swimmers manage to pass, we are lost! exclaimed the man who had first brought attention to the condition of the shield.

Rakhma raised her hand to strike the ominous bird. Then he realized that the man was just telling the truth. The kandisa was coming down and in a few seconds she would need him.

In the dark, Sebesh had trouble determining how far above the surface he was. His lungs were burning for lack of oxygen. He looked behind him. He had seen too many flashes marking the end of those who had touched the canvas. He tried to clear his mind of the green particles floating in the water after the lightning had passed.

One is already too many, he thought, as he pulled out the reed slipped into his loincloth. He knew that his companions did the same. Whereas

his lungs were about to explode, he stuck one end of the reed out into the air, blew out the water, and greedily sucked in the air that didn't seem to want to fill his lungs. The pain in his chest eventually subsided.

Sebesh knew that other reeds like his were starting to grow all over the harbor. He had advised his men to let out only a short length of reed, hoping that this, added to the darkness, would be enough to hide them from those in the port.

If we are seen...

He refused to go any further. But it had to be. If they were seen, at least they wouldn't die helpless in their ships, crushed by the web of ***mchawi.*** And if they could even get a foot on the ground, they could at least kill a few opponents.

Sebesh stayed like that for some time, recovering his strength and sucking as much air as possible.

Nuab-tsho's heart leaped with excitement as he saw the sudden weakening of the kandisa's sphere. It was no longer even necessary to look at the canvas at intervals. Victory was imminent. The other sentries joined him in a shout of triumph. With the armada crushed, they would soon rejoin their comrades and take part in the battle brewing in the north.

Not one saw the dozens of reeds coming in their direction.

In the Erriten palace, Chibenguela allowed himself a moment to rejoice in the impending dissolution of the kandisa's shield.

She is alone, there are many of us, he thought. ***Victory has always been on our side!***

The other Erriten shared his joy. They sent even more ***mchawi*** into the conduit that fed the web. The spheres above their heads throbbed with power and the tendrils of their bodies were rock hard as the ***mchawi*** blazed with unleashed energy.

The culmination of a thousand rains old plan was approaching. Once the kandisa had been defeated, it would be a mere formality for the Erriten to redirect their ***mchawi*** to come to the aid of the soldiers of the army which was advancing to meet the troops of the monomatapa.

After that…

After that, the Mashataan will be free to march in the Nyumbani again, thought Chibenguela. ***The Cloud Striders will be helpless. The other gods, those born from and in the Nyumbani, will be***

forced to hide in their rocks, trees and animals while the Mashataan reshape the continent. And we Erriten will walk alongside the God-Demons, and be like gods ourselves...

— Benguela!

The Erriten leader turned, irritated by Chilaka's insistent voice.

- What is it ?

"The Unchanged, Chibenguela!" cried Chilaka, frightened. It is here !

Chibenguela's eyes widened and the emotions he had tried so hard to suppress bubbled up to the surface.

- How do you know ?

"I can ***feel*** his presence," Chilaka replied defensively. He's trying to hide, but he won't be able to hide from me. At least not for very long. I taught him what he can do.

- So it is you who are responsible for the danger he represents for us now! barked Chibenguela. Where is he ?

“Near where the prisoners are kept.

- Prisoners ! he blurted out with a snort of contempt. We should have killed them a long time ago. We should never have allowed him to keep them alive. It was ***you*** who spoke on his behalf...

"It was necessary," Chilaka explained defensively. You would have killed them, and him with it. But we needed them alive.

"And now he's turned against us!" said Chibenguela. And he is here! Unchanged is more dangerous for us than kandisa. We must find him… and kill him!

"We can't tighten the web and hunt him down at the same time," an Erriten said. We can only do one or the other, and we have to decide right away. Remember… The Unchanged knows all our secrets. The kandisa none. If he sided with him...

The Erriten left his sentence hanging. The others understood what his words implied.

Chibenguela and Chilaka stared at each other fiercely, staring at each other. It was Chilaka who looked away. Chibenguela was the First.
It was up to him to make the decision and bear the consequences.

Chibenguela cursed the day the unchanged was born, and he cursed the day the Erriten brought him to their palace.

The kandisa let herself fall into Rakhma's arms. She was as light as a feather. Only her intense fever indicated that she was still alive. As the emerald web continued its descent, voices from nearly half a thousand ships rose to howl their desperation and defiance at the ***mchawi web.*** Some clashed their swords and spears; others hid their faces and fell to their knees, awaiting an annihilation that seemed inevitable.

Rakhma knelt down and cradled the kandisa in her arms. He brought his mouth close to the young woman's ear and whispered to her a name he hadn't pronounced for more than ten rains. And he remembered at that moment another time when he had held the kandisa in his arms.

She had chosen him to be the father of the next monarch of the line of kandisa and jaliyin of Cush. As was customary, the affair had remained secret. She had given him her real name, and he had promised in return to use her only for the brief time that their clandestine love would last. He had just broken that promise.

"Nefkhari," he said, so softly that only she could hear him.

He thought the din of battle had drowned out his single word, but the kandisa's eyes opened and her lips curved into a slight smile.

Then the cry of horror and despair that the sailors uttered changed suddenly in tone, and became a cry of surprise and wonder.

Rakhma looked at ***mchawi's mesh.*** Beneath his mask, his breath wheezed as he watched the filaments unravel, darken, then vanish completely as if a gigantic black rag had swept them from the sky.

On the docks, Nuab-tsho and the other sentries stood dumbfounded as they watched the canvas disappear. He had waited in vain for the order to board the ships concealed under the jetty to go and finish off any survivors. And suddenly there was no longer any question of order. The sky was cloudy for a few moments. Even the stars seemed to have disappeared. Then they began to reappear, twinkling like the eyes of tiny creatures peering from deep within the forest.

What did they do ? Nuab-tsho wondered uncomfortably. He had never pretended to understand the motives of the Erriten, but he felt upset with them at this precise moment.

He heard too late the sound of something coming out of the water and hoisting itself onto the pier. He leaned forward and probed the water with his spear. A dark shape dodged the tip of the weapon. A blade glinted in the starlight. Searing pain in his ankle made Nuab tsho scream. The Naama quickly put his hand to his leg. The dark form sat up completely and the sword struck again. Nuab tsho's second cry died in his throat as the flat of Sebesh's blade shattered his skull.

Similar scenes played out the full length of the piers as Sebesh's volunteers hoisted themselves out of the water and put the guards to the sword. That's when they realized the web was gone. They were so absorbed in their mission that they hadn't realized it before.

Euphoria spread among the Cushites like a savannah fire. But they struck in silence until the end. They still had work to do in the Lower City. With their ships freed from the canvas, the mission now seemed a little less suicidal than it had started.

The Erriten were in front of the prisoners' dungeon. The cell was empty.

“Too late,” Chilaka muttered. We are too late, and the invaders are still in port.

Chibenguela boiled with rage at the criticism implicit in Chilaka's remarks. He hadn't removed the mesh happily, but Chilaka was right about one thing: the unchanged posed a far greater threat to the Erriten than the kandisa, weakened as she was.

He had hoped that the invaders would decide to flee once the web was gone. It was not unreasonable to assume so, the kandisa having little ***tawa*** in reserve, if any at all. A panic was therefore quite possible.

"They won't stay long.

Chibenguela smoothed her dress over her distended body. They had put their clothes back on after they had stopped pouring the ***mchawi.*** Bohu had told the truth when he said that the Erriten hated what the Change had done to their bodies.

"We have to find the unchanged," said Chilaka.

'We will,' said Chibenguela. He may well be able to pass from one place to another, it will not be able to slip through our fingers forever.

"Chibenguela!" one of the Erriten suddenly exclaimed. I projected my senses towards the piers. We are attacking our men!

- To the spheres, answered the latter when he had regained control of himself. Chilaka, I entrust you with the mission of rediscovering the unchanged... and kill.

'I taught him. I can kill him, Chilaka replied confidently.

As Chibenguela and the others turned and prepared to return to the main room with their heavy gait, Chilaka allowed himself a single, single thought, powerfully protected.

I can kill him...but I won't.

Dusk was falling when Msipo and his scouts returned to the main body of the monomatapa. The scouts had spotted Msipo's nyuvha-ya- ***mbizi coming from the south at a gallop. They had opened their mouths to greet them, but the*** mbizi ***had continued their mad race, as if their riders were incapable of controlling them. The latter rocked on their saddles. The warriors understood that they were dead.***

They caught up with them and managed to immobilize them. It was when they looked closely at the dead scouts that they were gripped by horror and nausea. The bodies hadn't just been strapped to their saddles. They had also been dismembered and decapitated, and the severed parts had been stitched together haphazardly on the trunks.

On the body of a Naglopa, Msipo's head gazed at them with eyes that did not see.

25.
BATTLE ON THE PLAINS

As they pushed deeper into the Lowlands, the monomatapa's army noted changes in the flora, if not the fauna. The land was beginning to look like Maguvurunde: large expanses of savannah interspersed with mounds of earth and small groves. As the descent progressed, the atmosphere was filled with humidity.

The invaders had gradually grown accustomed to the reptilian creatures, though the hissing roar of ***the inguluku*** never failed to disconcert them.

The region was bathed in the ***mchawi.*** Imaro's bracelets almost screamed that they were in Bohu country. The warrior, however, had the intimate conviction that he would not meet his adversary before the army reached the city of the Erriten.

If the Naama had thought to frighten the invaders by desecrating the bodies of Msipo and the scouts, they had been mistaken. A cold anger masked the grief and disgust of the warriors. Mkwayo had ordered the bodies to be buried and their spirits consecrated to their ancestors. He told Katisa only his sorrow at losing his old friend Msipo and his regret that he died when they had blamed each other for things recently.

When the Northmen reached the outskirts of Naama territory, they came across a village, abandoned and destroyed. The cultivated land had been reduced to a heap of coal and ash. The reptiles that served as cattle, sheep and goats had been slaughtered, and their carcasses served as food for carrion lizards the size of jackals, which had fled at the approach of the army.

The Abamba who had fought against the Tsubi during the ***mfecane*** were appalled at such wanton carnage. It was the Erriten, via Bohu, who had initiated the cattle slaughter among the Tsubi. Were they doing

the same with their people? The monomatapa did not fail to take note.

The next village had also been abandoned, the fields burned and the cattle slaughtered. The small lake that served as a water point had been poisoned with animal carcasses. There was not the slightest sign of the inhabitants, not even of corpses.

"Do they exterminate their own people?" Mkwayo asked Pomphis.

- Nope. If so, they would have left the bodies behind to make it clear to us what to expect from them. The purpose of these destructions is to ensure that we find neither water nor food on our way. And, on this subject, where are our reserves?

"They're low," Mkwayo admitted. But they should allow us to last until we reach the city.

The monomatapa straightened in his saddle and looked at the ***mtekwa*** gathered around him.

"We're leaving," he said dryly. Reduce food portions.

"I hope Msipo doesn't turn out to have been a prophet," whispered one of the ***mtekwas.***

"I hope like you," said Mkwayo, who had heard him.

Although he said nothing more, Mkwayo was well aware of the climate of anxiety that reigned among his troops.

He still didn't know if the kandisa's offensive had succeeded. But he knew that no matter what, his army would fight to the last man. The atrocities suffered by Msipo and his scouts would propel his warriors forward far more than food and drink.

So the army pushed south, past the ruins, like a inevitable wave of leather and steel.

The gigantic rocky plateau on which the Upper City of Naama was built invaded the horizon long before the army could see their adversaries. None of the soldiers had ever seen such a curious rock formation; neither cliff nor mountain, but a mixture of both. For the Naglopa, it was something else again: a memory transmitted from generation to generation, but even they were far from representing the reality of the landscape.

There hadn't been a single skirmish yet. All the villages on their way had been destroyed like the first two, abamba like naama. The soldiers felt much more like advancing in a wild desert than in an ancient and powerful kingdom.

The water was running low when the warriors finally saw the enemy, far beyond the shadow of the plateau. The naama forces were considerable, stretching from one end of the horizon to the other. Earlier, the monomatapa scouts had nearly killed their ***mbizi*** in their haste to report what they had seen... and avoid Msipo's fate.

Mkwayo, Imaro, Solosha and the other northern force commanders listened intently to what the scouts had to say. The force mobilized by the Naama was comparable to that of the invaders but, in some ways, the Naama had an advantage.

"Do they have cavalry?" Mkwayo asked.

"Yes," one of the scouts answered, his face and breastplate smeared with dust. Not horses, but two-legged creatures resembling ***imbona,*** but much more massive. Mounted troops make up about a third of their strength.

- They have enough to compete with our ***chipimbere ?***

“No, but they have these… things.

Mkwayo once again heard of the inhuman creatures fighting alongside the Naama. ***Izingogo, unthlatu, irimu…*** At first, they had been little more than names heard from the mouth of Majnun when the king in exile had stayed in Mji-Amanyani. The scouts confirmed that the ranks of the Naama were lined with monstrous creatures.

Their troops also included Abamba warriors, who marched apart from the cavalry and infantry of the Naama. It was obvious that they were bewitched. This news fills Solosha and the other ***nkosi with sadness.*** In the Highlands, Abamba tribes and clans had warred with each other for countless generations. But to have to fight because they were bewitched… The idea was repugnant to the warriors, and they took pity on these men.

Solosha and Nzangakona, an ***induna*** who had survived the battle of Udongaluka and now acted as the temporary ***nkosi*** of the Mtatwa, swore to deliver the Abamba from the yoke of the Naama, even if the Abamba would try to kill them during the war. upcoming battle.

"Looks like the ***irimu*** are going to neutralize our ***chipimbere," Mkwayo*** pointed out. We can use the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** against the ***izingogo.*** The ***unthlatu*** look like a sort of man who has scales instead of skin. Our infantry should be able to handle it.

“They say the bite of the ***unthlatu*** is poisonous,” said Pomphis.

'Then we will oppose them with men in armour.

"One last thing," said the scout. We heard ***inguluku-like whistles,*** but could n't see a single one.

The commanders exchanged confused looks. If the Naama had domesticated the ***inguluku*** to make them war animals, then the advantage would lean very seriously in their camp.

The battlefield stretched out like a dust-colored carpet. A few patches of grass speckled the plain, which had long been trampled and yellowed. Jua the sun rose in the sky to attend the confrontation which was announced.

The Northmen were the first to move. The center of the monomatapa's army was held by the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere.*** The steel-sheathed horns of the ***chipimbere*** jutted out in a forest of spikes.

Imaro rode with the heavy cavalry. He had learned to ride the ***chipimbere*** on the way down to the south. The idea of riding an animal so close to its irascible Tamburure cousin was beyond him, but ***chipimbere*** were far more docile and intelligent than their wild cousins, and soon Imaro realized that his special bond with cattle and horses also existed with the animal he rode.

The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** were on the flanks, and constituted the light cavalry. They had slender spears and round shields. Their ***mtekwa*** watched the swift two-legged mounts of the Naama cavalry. The reptiles were dark brown in color, with lighter horizontal stripes running from head to tail. Their long jaws were lined with sharp teeth. Their front legs ended in curved claws. When they ran, their long tails hung down behind them. The Naglopa called these animals ***otibi.*** In the wild, they moved in herds, making them almost as dangerous as the ***inguluku.***

Behind Mkwayo's cavalry advanced the infantry. Troops Imperials in leather armor alternated with the ***impis*** of the Abamba.

Far behind, the carts of provisions, the healers, all those who follow the armies looked at the cloud of dust raised by the advance of the troops. When the cloud settled, the battle would be over.
They were ready to celebrate the victory of the monomatapa forces or, on the contrary, to flee the Naama if the battle turned against them. They knew full well that in the latter case, few would survive.

The Naglopa were in the back. They, too, knew what awaited them in the event of a Naama victory, and that their slings and daggers were not suitable for a pitched battle. If by chance the Naama were to win, they died fighting. They would no longer hide in the Umbane.

Tshingi stroked the steel blade of the dagger Imaro had given him. He longed to immerse her in a body of Naama. Pomphis, also standing back, looked at him benevolently.

Mkwayo and Katisa advanced to the very front, resplendent in their polished breastplates and sparkling gold. They rode ***mbizi*** rather than ***chipimbere.*** They would need fast mounts to move from one strategic location in the battle to another as the clashes progressed.

They surveyed the forces arrayed against them. The men mounted on the reptiles were in the center and the infantry on either side. At the far end, on either side, stood the Abamba, staring blankly, shields in front of them, spears brandished.

None of the monstrous creatures were in the front line. The ***irimu*** and ***unthlatu*** were massed behind the cavalry. The ***izingogo*** were gathered in compact groups, waiting to be able to throw themselves on their adversaries.

Far behind, a group of Erriten acolytes could be seen. Their robes reflected the sun in a myriad of colors. They used what little ***mchawi*** they had to control about fifty ferocious ***inguluku ,*** which the naama troops were afraid of. If the battle turned against them, the ***inguluku*** could turn things around. If the Naama broke through the enemy lines, the carnivores would complete the rout of their adversaries.

The disposition of the troops seemed to favor the invaders. A charge from the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere would*** scatter the reptiles, then the ***nyuvha-***

ya-mbizi would attack the infantry, leaving the way open for the monomatapa's infantry to concentrate on the ***irimu*** and ***unthlatu.***

Mkwayo's strategy unfolded in his mind as he surveyed the battlefield, but he had no illusions about winning with a quick battle. For the Naama cavalry was beginning to charge. The riders riding the reptiles had bows. The northerners had none.

Tuab-tshi, commander of the Naama cavalry, smiled broadly. The mounted archers were an innovation suggested to them by the Dark Man. He remembered the discomfort he had felt when Bohu had appeared in the form of a shadow long before the war against the kandisa began.

He'd been skeptical at first, thinking the animal's rolling gait didn't lend itself to sniping. As Tuab-tshi refused to believe Bohu, the latter had mounted an ***otibi*** to give a demonstration. To this day, Tuab-tshi mourned the eight men he had lost in this demonstration. By dint of training, the archers had succeeded in coordinating their gestures and learning to shoot from the back of a moving animal. And today, as his men closed in on the enemy army, he saw the ***chipimbere*** as the Dark Man saw them: huge targets.

Mkwayo thinks quickly as he sees their opponents coming. He understood that the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** would be riddled with arrows within minutes. Breastplates and thick skin could not stop those deadly arrows. He suddenly turned in his saddle and shouted an order: "Dismount!"

The first darts were already beginning to fly when Mkwayo dismounted and ordered his men to turn their mounts so as to expose their flanks to the horde surging upon them. The riders took cover behind their mounts. Many cried as they forced their ***chipimbere*** to stand still under the deluge of arrows.

The ***otibi*** passed parallel to the invaders' first line, and the naama archers fired volley after volley at the ***chipimbere.***
Some arrows flew over and planted themselves in the bodies of infantry and cavalry who sought to find protection behind the rampart of flesh. The gigantic animals, however, received

the vast majority of arrows. They bellowed in pain, trampled convulsively on the ground and threw their heads aside, sometimes ripping apart their riders in the process. But not a single animal ran away. They died on the spot, forming, while collapsing, a barricade behind which their horsemen and the infantry were cowered.

Their first assault made, the Naama described a wide loop and regained their lines. They seized more arrows and launched their second assault, this time aiming above and beyond the dead ***chipimbere .***

Mkwayo shouted his new instructions, at Katisa's suggestion. Solosha marched his warriors forward. They welded their shield just behind the ***chipimbere carcasses.*** A shower of arrows hissed in their direction and hundreds of arrows bit the thick leather in a staccato of thunder. Some warriors gave way, others died, but they did not fall, held back by the strong arms of their companions who thus preserved the wall of shields.

The Naama returned to their lines. They hadn't lost a single man yet, and their darts had found a few targets. But the men from the north had not been routed, as Bohu had predicted. The Naamas had made no breach.

It was Mkwayo's turn to attack. On the orders of the monomatapa, the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** detached themselves from the flanks and threw themselves on the Naama who were busy aiming their arrows. Some had time to shoot the ***mbizi*** and their riders, but the reptiles were much faster than those of the Naama. A loud cry went up from the monomatapa's troops as the first darts found their naama targets.

Tuab-tshi's face was a mask of fury as he ordered his archers to target the horsemen. Although the enemy's heavy cavalry had been destroyed, most of the cavalry had survived and the front line was intact. The advantage taken by the Naama was derisory and he realized that it was much more difficult to hit the ***mbizi*** than the ***chipimbere.***

It was therefore the non-human allies who would have the honor of sweeping away the invaders. Tuab-tshi well understood why the Naama had enlisted the help of the ***unthlatu, irimu ,*** and ***izingogo,*** but he felt uneasy in their presence, and took himself for granted.

gladly wished the creatures had stayed in their usual Lowland lairs.

"Incendiary arrows!" ordered the commander, pushing those thoughts away.

A volley flew to fall on the ***mbizi.*** Striped mounts came down thrashing and screaming in pain. Horsemen fell from their saddles, arrows protruding from their bodies. But many were unscathed, many darts having missed their targets.

Cursing in frustration, Tuab-tshi fired an arrow at random himself, not caring where his bolt went. Then he prepared his men for an additional charge.

With the respite provided by the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi,*** the invaders were able to attend to their wounded. Only a few ***chipimbere*** had survived the volleys of arrows. Their riders tended to them with care, tearing dozens of arrows from their tough hides. Then the animals were driven back.

Mkwayo stood near the shield rampart. Perched on the carcass of a ***chipimbere,*** he watched the unfolding of the battle. Mkwayo's forces had blunted the vigor of the early enemy charges. But they knew that the ***irimu*** would soon enter the scene. Even from the distant place where he was, he could see them grouping together. Each lion-demon was worth five of his men, except himself and Imaro. The ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** would have evened the odds, but there weren't enough of them anymore.

Soon the Lightning Bird will be here, thought Mkwayo. He considered various possible strategies and turned to Katisa. It was at this moment that Tuab-tshi's arrow fell and sank into his chest.

" ***Where are you?" called him Chilaka, probing with his supernatural senses the walls and the halls of the Erriten Palace. Where are you ?***

His voice was an echo that echoed in his skull with accents mockers.

" ***I know you're here," he insisted. You cannot travel between dimensions when you are watched by others. You are here. Show yourself !***

Chilaka's voice sharpened. It was the tone of a master scolding a disobedient student. In the past, such intonation would have had the desired effect. Now…

" ***I am here.***

Bohu's voice came from behind him. Chilaka turned…and his eyes widened in horror.

26.
“ LET US PASS. »

When the sun rose, the Cushites and their allies controlled nearly half of the Lower City. The invaders were engaged in fierce fighting to expand the bridgehead established at the docks. The Naama resisted fiercely in the narrow streets that wound between their dwellings, but the bulk of their forces were on the plain north of the Upper City.

The Erriten had thought they could destroy the armada with their ***mchawi.*** The inhabitants of the Lower City paid with their lives for their miscalculation.

Once the quays were cleaned, the Allied ships were able to land troops, engines and animals of war. Once the initial shock had passed, the few garrison soldiers and civilians had offered fierce resistance throughout the night. But they were significantly outnumbered by their opponents, and the docks kept spouting reinforcements landing from the ships.

After a lull at dawn, the troops of the kandisa began the ascent to the Cité Haute. In the streets, blood flowed on the cobblestones and the corpses piled up like so much rubbish on the sides.

As they carried the battle to the Naama, the Allied soldiers did not fail to notice that some inhabitants of the Lower City managed not to take part in the fighting. They could be seen slipping behind the buildings, or remaining furtively watching the clashes from the roof terraces, Abamba like Naama. Freed from the perpetual surveillance of their masters, they observed, and waited, before acting.

Both defenders and attackers cast repeated glances in the direction of the Upper City. The Erriten could manifest their power at any time. But nothing like that happened.

On board the ***Khaiyah,*** the kandisa was lying, curled up on her own on the bed of her cabin. Rakhma was at his side, one hand in the kandisa's. He had covered her with a white cotton sheet, under the folds of which it was hard to see her breathing. She looked like a wounded bird, motionless in a place where she couldn't survive for very long.

Rakhma no longer had his lion mask. On the docks of the Lower City, he had given up his command post and given his mask to Sebesh in recognition of his daring raid. Rakhma would have preferred to lead the assault on the Upper City, but he couldn't leave the kandisa.

The absence of a mask revealed a man in the prime of life. It was not as well preserved as the kandisa, which had seen slightly less rain than it. His cropped hair was still very black overall, but worries had carved deep furrows into his ebony skin.

“Nefkhari,” he whispered. Can you hear me?

He felt the slight pressure of her hand in his, then his eyelids opened. The golden irises of his eyes were like two tiny suns about to sink on the horizon.

"What are we going to do, Nefkhari?" Rakhma asked. The runners have returned to inform us that the Lower City will soon be under our control. The Erriten may have dissolved their net, but not out of weakness. They could have wiped us out the moment your shield failed.

The kandisa nodded.

"The Erriten have set a trap for us," he continued. I'm sure. But we have no way of detecting it, and no way of knowing if the monomatapa forces can prevail north. They must fight right now, otherwise the city would have been better defended.

Rakhma was thinking out loud. He didn't expect any response. Suddenly, she shook his hand sharply. When he looked at her, the kandisa's eyes were wide open and lucid.

“Imaro is the answer,” she said. He and I must meet in the High City. This is where the ***chephet*** will be restored .

"And you want me to drive you to the Upper City," he said, looking away.

"This imbalance must end," she said, squeezing his hand again. If the ***chephet*** is not restored…

'I know what will happen,' he said bitterly.

Letting out a muffled cry that could have been a sob, he leaned down and took her in his arms. He clung to her and she returned his embrace with all the strength she had left.

He wrapped her body in the sheet, picked her up and carried her out of the cabin.

Katisa removed the arrow from Mkwayo's chest. Her skillful fingers undo the ties that held the two halves of his chest plate together.

The cuirass was thick. Mkwayo's chest muscles thicker still, but even so, the arrow had grazed his heart. The blood was flowing even when she compressed the flesh. Mkwayo's eyes were open. He didn't cry out when the pain started to spread throughout his body. But for him, the battle was over. The injury didn't seem like much, but he was out of action.

The eyes of the ***mtekwa*** had turned to Imaro, who had rushed to his father's side the second he heard he had been shot.
Betserai, the oldest of the ***mtekwa*** now that Msipo was dead, spoke for the others.

“You must be our leader now, benematapa.

Imaro's eyes met hers. The ***mtekwa*** couldn't read much in the warrior's gaze. Then Imaro knelt beside his father. Father, mother and son were protected by the carcass of a ***chipimbere.***

— Keep the wound closed while I tear off a piece of cloth to bandage it, Katisa told him.

Imaro's hands replaced Katisa's. He felt the warmth of his father's body and the beating of his heart on his palms. He heard the sound of fabric tearing. Mkwayo's eyes were locked on Imaro's. But the monomatapa does not say a word.

Katisa pushed Imaro's hand away and began to dress the wound. She thought of the lessons she had received from healers, but there was little chance of finding the herbs she would need on the battlefield.

- Mother.

Katisa looked at Imaro. Her mouth opened to tell him not to disturb her, then closed when she saw his face. He had that same expression the day he asked her why she had

abandoned to the Ilyassai, knowing he would be treated as a fatherless son.

"Heal him," he said simply.

He got up and turned to face Betserai and all the ***mtekwas.*** His eyes reflected the glare of the shining sun on the Lightning Bird that adorned his chest. Bitterness and doubts were gone. The ***mtekwas got*** the impression that he was even bigger than usual.

As the roars of the ***irimu echoed*** across the plain, Imaro gave his first orders, in a calm, unruffled voice. He knew fully that this was the battle he was born to fight.

Beneath their emerald spheres, the Erriten communicated with the Mashataan. The God-Demons were so close to the barrier that separated their dimension from that of the Nyumbani that the Naama could almost feel the presence of their masters in the empty room.

It was as if the Erriten were hiding in the tall grass, and gigantic creatures passed only a few feet away, but unlike the small animals of the savannah, the Erriten could not remain invisible. Their brows streamed with sweat as they listened to the thoughts of their masters ring out like so many blows of
thunder:

LET US PASS...YOU HAVE FAILED...WE CAN ONLY WIN IT THIS WAY...SHE HAS NO MORE POWER...SHE CANNOT CALL ON THE CLOUD SURVIVORS TO HELP HER...WE HAVE SHOWN YOU THE WAY TO MAKE US PASS… DO IT… OR

YOU WILL SUFFER…

Chibenguela felt the masters' message seep into his skull like water falling from high above and crashing on rocks below. He also knew fear, a fear far greater than anything he had felt since that distant day when he had seen the first manifestations of the Change on his body.

The others shared his terror. They knew that when the Mashataan marched into Nyumbani again, Erriten supremacy would be a thing of the past. They may have lived a very long time, but their lives were a mere flickering flame compared to that of the Mashataan. They might be powerful, but they were nothing compared to their masters.

Once the barrier was breached, the Mashataan would no longer need them. It was only now that they realized it. The Mashataan had already expressed their dissatisfaction with the various successive failures of the Erriten's strategy. Once they arrived at the Nyumbani, it was obvious that they would get rid of the faulty instruments they had revealed themselves to be.

We have to buy time, thought Chibenguela desperately. ***But how ?*** At that moment, all the Erriten grimaced. A brief but searing pain shot through them. The Mashataan were not the source of this pain, even though the Erriten knew about it.

When an Erriten found death, all the others sensed it immediately. Their minds weren't connected, but they knew when others were fine or not. The death of one was felt by all.

Chilaka! Chibenguela and the others thought simultaneously.

The pressure from the Mashataan increased further.

In the depths of the Erriten Palace, Bohu stood above the charred, smoldering remains of one who had been both his mentor and sworn enemy. It was the first time he had openly challenged an Erriten, never having dared to face the fear they aroused in him.

He no longer feared them.

So easy, he thought, staring at the remains of Chilaka. ***So easy to defeat him.***

His face lifted to where he knew the Erriten hall was. He had shielded his thoughts perfectly, which had allowed him to catch Chilaka off guard. He could surprise the others, focused on the simultaneous invasions of the kandisa and the monomatapa.

But that was not his intention. He still had an ounce of respect for their combined power. He was going to wait. Waiting for the chaos he had helped to sow to reach its climax.

Bohu turned away from Chilaka's corpse and walked towards where he stood. now found its prisoners.

They still have a role to play, he thought. ***Imaro will eventually arrive.***

He strengthened his mental shield against the Erriten, so he did not know that the conflict between his masters and theirs was growing.

Sword in hand, Rakhma moved as stealthily as possible through the streets of the Lower City. In his free hand he carried the kandisa, slung over his shoulder and wrapped in a sheet. She weighed almost nothing.

He was stunned by the architecture of the city, of which all the buildings had been built identically. By contrast, the streets were a series of endless mazes. He had had no trouble advancing among the Cushites. Few would have recognized him without his mask, and he had put on a dark cloak to hide his armor.

The sun shone in the sky, but a dark mist hung over the Lower City… Smoke from the raging fires. Rakhma remained as far as possible in the shadows, hand resting on the hilt of his sword.

No one should see us.

If the kandisa's ***tawa*** had been at its normal level, she could have weaved a veil of invisibility around them, but she had almost no power left. She still managed to warn him mentally of imminent danger, to guide him through the maze of streets.

- Which way ? Rakhma murmured, her head leaning against the kandisa's heart.

She showed him the way with a light mental touch. He advanced, skirting the walls, ready to draw and strike anyone who got in his way.

The kandisa's powers must have been weaker than Rakhma believed, as she should have detected the dark shapes that were trailing behind them and coming a little closer every moment.

A little more than a dozen ***chipimbere*** had survived the rain of arrows, some slightly injured, others unscathed. These were the core of Imaro's defense against the ***irimu.***

Imaro sat on a ***chipimbere.*** He observed the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** who quickly took their place on either side of the ***chipimbere.*** Even though the ***irimu*** had no mounts, their leonine muscles propelled them with terrifying speed towards their opponents.

"They're like Ngatun on two legs," Imaro muttered as he examined the alignments of his cavalry, then of his infantry.

His gaze rested for a few seconds on the small group of men surrounding Mkwayo and Katisa. Then he looked to the far north, where a stai

black was advancing at full speed towards the encampment in the rear, far behind the battlefield.

Come quickly, my friends, thought Imaro.

He then urged his ***chipimbere*** to go forward, and his blood was inflamed with fierce joy as he launched his warriors against the ***irimu.***

Pomphis was the first to see the ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi rushing*** towards the camp from the rear. He understood right away that the news was important, even if he had no idea what it was about.

The foaming ***mbizi*** stopped just in front of the Bambuti. Her rider dismounted and gave a concise account of the start of the battle. Caressing his chin with the palm of his hand, Pomphis listened intently.

Mkwayo out of action… Imaro at the head of the army… mounted archers… lion-demons…

— There will be work for the Naglopa and their slings eventually, he said, before the man had even got to that portion of his message.

The soldier blinked, then nodded. He was weary, but was nevertheless eager to return to the battlefield.

"I'll pass on the message to Tshingi," he assured the horseman. We We'll be on foot, of course, but we'll get there as soon as possible.

- Are you coming too ? asked the messenger, unable to hide his surprise.

- Yes. Imaro will need me as much as he needs the Naglopa.

The rider says nothing more. He led his ***battered mbizi*** to the paddock, where he could trade it for a fresh mount that would bring him back to the battlefield.

Pomphis went to look for the Naglopa, who had settled in a separate camp, away from those who were responsible for ensuring the supply of food and animals for the army. Always eager to learn a new language, Pomphis had made great progress in theirs, a variant of the naama which Pomphis knew how to read from his time in the Cushite libraries, but which he was unable to speak.

He found Tshingi sitting in front of a shelter made of sticks and leaves. Beside him was a pile of pebbles, smooth and round. He held his sling in both hands, testing its elasticity.

"You know what I came to tell you," said Pomphis, kneeling side of Naglopa.

Tshingi's eyes met those of the Bambuti.

— It is as easy to hide behind men and animals as behind the rocks, said the Naglopa.

With that, he straightened up and called his warriors. All of them had collected a large number of pebbles and had slipped them into the pouches which hung at their waists. They solemnly watched as their leader dropped his people into his purse.

Freedom, Pomphis thought suddenly. ***This is what they are fighting for today. They want to be free to be able to walk on the land of their ancestors.***

At that moment, his respect for the Naglopa grew. And he regretted initially reduced to a mere band of mixed blood.

High above the mountains that the monomatapa's army had painstakingly crossed, a golden bird stretched its wings and rode the air currents. Its plumage made a trail like a flash of sunlight.

The bright eyes of the bird sparkled above the tracks and passes, seeing what no other eye could see. The great bird passed between the jagged peaks of the Umbane. He was flying so fast his shadow was just a fleeting smudge on the walls.

Responding to a call much more felt than heard, the Lightning Bird continued on its way south. The air around him snapped as he passed.

27.
THE LIGHTNING BIRD

The faces of the ***irimu*** were flat, but feline: frozen features, tawny color, which growled furiously under their shaggy manes. Eyes with slit pupils shone deep in their sunken sockets. White fangs flashed in mouths that were red caverns.
Except for the lack of a muzzle, there was nothing approaching human in the faces of the lion-demons.

Hands covered in golden fur gripped the hilts of maces and swords. Rectangular shields of hammered iron protected their giant, powerfully muscled carcasses. Their claws were formidable weapons in themselves.

The lion-demons were dressed in tunics and loincloths, but their clothes were useful only when they returned to their human form.
In their normal guise, the ***irimu*** needed no more clothing than the actual lions the Mashataan had used to create their species, there were countless rains of that. Deep in their eyes was a bestial savagery… and a fearsome intelligence.

The lions-demons were convinced that they alone could rout the enemy army. The Naama were also of this opinion and they had left the battlefield to them.

The demon-lions charged in a roaring golden mass that crashed against the wall of the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere. Imaro*** 's chipimbere horn impaled the first ***irimu*** that reached the opposing army.

With a violent twist of the head, the ***chipimbere*** sent ***the irimu*** flying through the air. Before the lifeless corpse fell to the ground, another had taken its place. With a roar, the second lion-demon slammed his mace fiercely into the ***chipimbere's skull.*** The large animal staggered under the impact of this super powerful blow, but managed to keep its

balance. Then Imaro's sword swung down, severing the ***irimu's face.*** Blood spurted from the horrible wound and the lion-demon slumped.

Imaro pulled violently on his reins to face the onslaught of two new assailants. The ***chipimbere*** 's legs trampled on the carcass of ***the irimu*** that Imaro had just killed. A trickle of blood flowed from the ***chipimbere's head.*** It swerved with disconcerting speed, greatly reducing the force of a lion-demon's impact on Imaro's shield. Even so, this one was nearly taken aback.

With a swing of his sword, he parried the mace of the other ***irimu.*** The ***Chipimbere*** turned again. This time, he collided with his adversary, who collapsed without a sound, his skull buried by the ***chipimbere's horn.*** Imaro received a hit on his shield. He took his left foot out of the stirrup and slammed his boot into the face of ***the irimu.*** The lion-demon collapsed, not having expected such a force, and not knowing that, like him, his adversary was more than human. A second later, the ***chipimbere*** 's horn shattered the shield of the last ***irimu*** and broke his arm like a branch. Letting out a howl of pain, the lion-demon ended up under the paws of Imaro's mount.

Taking advantage of the lull, Imaro hoisted himself up in his stirrups and scanned the battlefield. The rest of his men weren't doing as well as him, but those who followed his orders fared a little better.

Do not oppose force to force, rather favor speed and cunning.

He was the only one of his men who could ignore his own advice.

The other ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** occupied the center of the formation. The ***chipimbere,*** few in number, formed a formidable barrier. The only possible tactic for the ***irimu*** consisted in throwing themselves on the animals in an attempt to snatch their riders from their saddles, which they had failed to do.

The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** had more difficulty. The ***irimu*** moved at a speed close to that of their four-legged ancestors. Tawny shapes leapt and dragged the riders with them, killing them before they touched the ground, and often taking their mounts to death in the process.

The horsemen also levied their tribute, striking with spears that hollowed out the ranks of the ***irimu.*** A large number of lion-demons were skewered like this before they could pounce on their opponents.

Imaro's attention was drawn ***to the irimu*** climbing the side of his ***chipimbere.*** The demon-lion's claws passed inches past the warrior's thigh before he brought down his shield, shattering his opponent's skull. He had to knock two more times before ***the irimu*** released its grip and fell to the ground.

Imaro straightened in his stirrups. This time, he looked directly at the lines of the Naama…and he saw movement. He had only a few seconds to conduct his observation before being forced to fight against an ***irimu*** determined to tear him from his saddle.

Behind the lines of the Naamas, a fiery discussion opposed the officers to Erriten acolytes.

"It is too early," said Guat-tshu, commander of the regular troops. Let the ***irimu*** tire them out. We have no need to throw our own soldiers into battle just yet.

"It's your own soldiers who failed in their mission," retorted the leader of the acolytes in a tone of contempt.

The sorcerer's name was Chilule, and his Change was not complete, despite the iridescent dress that enveloped her body.

Guat-tshu looked at Tuab-tshi with wide eyes. The archer commander frowned, but said nothing. He knew very well that Chilule was talking about him. If the ***otibi*** had succeeded in their mission, the battle would already have been won.

Guat-tshu's helmet was shaped ***like an inguluku's head.*** Her amber face seemed trapped between the steel jaws that framed her.

“It makes no sense to endanger our forces any more than is necessary. necessary while the city is under siege, finally said the commander.

"Don't try to prevaricate, Guat-tshu," barked Chilule. I know exactly what you think of our non-human allies. You wouldn't shed a single tear if our adversaries were to exterminate them to the very last.

Guat-tshu refused to meet his gaze. He didn't disagree with the Acolyte on that point. Two reasons explained the loyalty of Guat-tshu and his people since the Erriten had revealed to them their plan to conquer the continent two rains before: fear of the Masters, and the promise of absolute power following the inevitable victory. on the Cushites.

Guat-tshu, however, remained uneasy about ***irimu*** and other non-human creatures.

"You must attack in force and now, Commander," Chilule said evenly.

Guat-tshu opened his mouth to protest, but the acolyte didn't give him time.

“This order comes straight from the Masters.

Guat-tshu turned on his heels. There was no more to discuss. The other commanders returned to their units to inform them of the Masters' decision. A general assault would finish off the monomatapa warriors and allow the victorious Naama troops to return to the city and defend it against the forces of the kandisa.

But we will have lost far too many men. Too many of our men and not enough others...

Chilule watched the soldiers trudging away. The commanders knew well that there was a permanent interaction between the Erriten and their creatures, but they did not know that this contact had been broken. Force attack was not what the Masters wanted.

It was what Chilule wanted.

Like a flood in the rainy season, the rest of the Naama army set off. Guat-tshu's primary objective was to isolate the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere,*** to cut off all room for maneuver and movement, so that the lion-demons could defeat them simply because of their numbers.

Chilule's last words came back to Guat-tshu's mind just before the onslaught.

One must kill at all costs the one whose armor is struck with a golden bird. The Masters demand his death.

Even from where he stood, Guat-tshu could see the shard of the Thunderbird on the chest of the gigantic warrior who decimated the ***irimu,*** perched on his ***chipimbere.***

What a pity he had to be killed before he had killed all the shapeshifters, the Naama thought, seconds before his troops engaged in battle with the invaders.

When the Naama launched their massive offensive, Imaro immediately understood its purpose and cursed while splitting the skull of another ***irimu.***

Despite their physical superiority, the lion-demons began to weaken before the tenacity of their adversaries. Given a little more time, Imaro was certain that he and his men would have prevailed against the ***irimu,*** at the cost of terrible losses. But he would never have the chance to really know… Not with the Naama soldiers who threatened to overrun his ranks.

Imaro raised his sword and struck the steel-reinforced part of his shield. Three times the signal rang out, cutting through the clash of weapons and human and non-human bellows.

The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** immediately abandoned the fight to rush at a gallop towards the flanks of the Naama army. With the mass of infantry arriving, they thus retained a significant margin of maneuver, instead of finding themselves prisoners of the human tide.

Imaro's infantry advanced rapidly towards the horde of opponents approaching them. A squad moved towards the center of the formation, where the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** were surrounded by the ***irimu.*** Almost all of the men in this squad were Abamba: tall, powerful warriors who had fought – and slain – lions in the Highlands. Ngwikas and Mtatwas who a few weeks ago had hurled themselves at each other's throats now ran side by side, shielding each other with their shields, spears thrust forward like horns.

In the Highlands, the ***irimu*** were creatures of legend. Stories circulated about them. There were stories of men who lured young women out of their ***kraals*** after dark, only to pounce on them and devour them once they had returned to their true form. Much rain had fallen since the last time an ***irimu*** had been sighted in the hill regions. The Abamba finally knew why: they had gathered in the Lowlands and made an alliance with the Naama.

The warriors were not without fear when they came to the rescue of the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere.*** But their fear was counterbalanced by the rage that aroused in them the memory of their ancestors being dragged away and killed by the lion-demons. Moreover, they knew the lions well.

The battle cries of a dozen clans and tribes split the din and the Abamba threw themselves into battle.

Solosha was at their head.

Imaro knew that he and his ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere*** would be vulnerable to a concerted assault from the ***irimu*** before the infantry arrived. Three of them had already been struck down by the ***irimu.*** As his sword rose and fell in a steady, monotonous rhythm, his blade covered scarlet from tip to hilt, he felt himself breaking away from the clash.

It was as if his soul was freeing itself from its carnal envelope. As he continued to fight, a part of him began to rise from the battlefield, and he felt like a bird. He felt no sense of danger. To be able to fly and to have a double consciousness seemed to him natural rather than extraordinary.

He saw the mounted detachments of the two camps throw themselves on each other. others then go back, like crashing waves.

The Naama's archers had lost the advantage of surprise and were almost out of arrows. The ***mbizi*** were faster than the mounts of the Naama. The ***nyuvha-ya-mbizi*** had figured out how to repel arrows with the help of their shield, then let loose on their opponents before they had time to nock new arrows.

He saw the disciplined ranks of monomatapa men standing firm against the onslaught of Naama, Abamba, and hordes of Unthlatu.

Hundreds of Naama were skewered on the spears of their adversaries. The ***unthlatu,*** as elusive as the serpents that were their distant ancestors, dodged spears and thrust their weapons through armor and flesh. Some snakemen threw themselves over the shields to sink their poisonous fangs into the throats of their opponents who then died in excruciating pain. But if the lines of the invaders quivered, they held firm.

He saw the men led by Solosha struggling with the irimu, ***and their spears sink into the flesh of lion-demons.***

The Abamba were powerful, but not as powerful as the ***irimu.*** Their shields, however, offered them good protection and they were skilled in the handling of spears. They remembered what Imaro had told them: to hunt the ***irimu*** the way they hunted the lions that preyed on cattle in the ***kraals.*** They fought in pairs, one attracting

the attention of ***the irimu,*** the other aimed at the weak point. But the ***irimu*** far outnumbered the ***nyuvha-ya-chipimbere.***

He saw the inguluku ***held still by the will of the Naama's acolytes...***

Imaro knew that the giant reptiles would soon be released. He wondered why the acolytes hadn't already done so. He wondered if it was necessary for the acolytes to be nearby to control them.
The Naama might not yet be ready to put their lives on the line, despite the chaos they could cause in the enemy ranks.

He saw himself.

His sword described a bloody wheel of death. His foot struck tawny faces that roared after him. His shield was chipped from receiving hammer blows. His ***chipimbere*** turned and headbutted, plunging its horn into ***the irimu.*** It was as if he were one with his mount, each lending its strength to the other. And yet the ***irimu*** still attacked, their faces distorted by their carnivorous fury.

He saw golden feathers on the tips of wings flapping slowly in a breeze that smelled of blood. He understood then why his spirit floated above the battlefield. He knew which eyes he had used to see the shifting chaos of the plain below.

The Thunderbird had come. He had only seen him once before… The day he had crossed the Zimbazi River to enter the Ngwika region. The Lightning Bird flew above them in a blinding golden flash, followed by a resounding sound of thunder that marked its passage through the air.

That day, the Lightning Bird had flown for Mkwayo. Now he was flying for Imaro, and the son shared the secret with the father, and all the other monomatapa of the Amanyani: To ***see a battlefield from above, with the eyes of a bird.***

Imaro had already figured out what he had to do to stop the acolytes from dropping the ***inguluku.*** The Lightning Bird had shown him the Naglopa who came running in steady strides towards the battlefield. And he saw other elements that would allow him to turn the battle to his advantage.

Suddenly the Thunderbird disappeared, its connection with Imaro severed. The battlefield was replaced by an ***irimu*** which had managed not to

disembowell by the ***chipimbere's horn.*** One foot resting on the animal, the lion-demon leaps towards Imaro.

Before the warrior could raise his shield, ***the irimu*** was upon him and dragging him backwards in its tracks. Man and lion-demon hit the ground with a titanic crash.

For the hundredth time, Sebesh raised a hand to his face to touch the lion mask. It was not comfortable to wear. He wondered how Rakhma had been able to get used to its weight… and to the responsibilities of whoever carried it.

He knew that Rakhma and the kandisa had entered the city. A servant who brought water had noticed their disappearance.

Sebesh understood the reason for their departure, and their probable destination.

Officers from five kingdoms stood before him, awaiting his orders. The weight of duty was beginning to turn into a burden.

The Lower City had fallen. Their casualties were far less than in any battle they had fought so far. But the ease with which they had won had aroused his suspicions. Despite his doubts, however, he only considered one course of action.

And he hoped that Rakhma would have come to the same conclusions as him.

At his command, the allies split in two. Part of the troops were looking for a way to access the Upper City. The other, much more substantial, and which included the war lions and the gunkwu, ***rose towards the plain located on the other side of the plateau on which the Upper City stood. They hoped to be able to come to the aid of the monomatapa's army, if this army still existed...***

28.
PARENTS

Rakhma knew that he and the kandisa were being followed. The signs were unmistakable: the friction of feet on the cobblestones...Fugitive shadows passing from one house to another...Muffled murmurs...

The Cushite secured his grip on the hilt of his sword.

Who ? Naama playing with us? Creatures of darkness who hit us with their mchawi? Or something else?

The kandisa stirred weakly. Rakhma stopped and scanned the street carefully. He saw no sign of their pursuers. Then he looked at the face of the kandisa. His eyes were closed but his lips were moving.
Rakhma leaned close to try to understand, but he heard nothing.

"What is it, Nefkhari?" he whispered. What are you trying to tell me?

A sudden premonition made him turn his head. His eyes widened, and he raised his sword. The street had seemed deserted to him the second before. It was now occupied by eight figures approaching them.

Even in the dark, Rakhma saw that the shapes were those of human beings. As they approached, it became clear that it was Abamba and not Naama. Three were women and five were stout men, who would have been warriors if they had been born in the Highlands. In the Lower City, on the other hand, they could only be slaves.
Their chain necklaces and the few scraps of fabric they used as clothing confirmed this idea.

Their eyes, however, were not those of slaves. Rage burned deep inside them like embers… rage and hatred. But there was also a glimmer of hope as they looked at the silhouette of the kandisa.

One of the women approached, palms open and facing upwards.
Rakhma saw that none of them had weapons. He did not lower his guard and his

sword though.

The woman began to speak, in a deep and eager voice, but Rakhma did not understand a word. The woman spoke Naama.

The kandisa understood this language, learned during the long preparation that would allow her to one day restore the ***chephet.*** The woman began to speak again, but this time suiting the action to the word, indicating that she wanted them to join them. Rakhma shook her head. How can you trust Naama slaves? It could be a trap...

“Nefkhari,” he whispered. If only you were strong enough to tell me what this woman is saying… At that moment, he felt the spirit of the kandisa touch his own and speak to him, in a weak but clear voice.

We have to go with them, Rakhma. They will lead us to the Upper City. They know the way, and they won't betray us...

He was about to ask her how she knew, but he closed his mouth. He trusted the kandisa. If she trusted those slaves, then so would he.

He sheathed his sword, which brought a quick smile to the woman's face. Again she motioned for him to follow her and her companions.
This time he nodded. He put the kandisa on his other shoulder and crossed the street to take the alley that the eight Abamba were taking. He hesitated for a second, then dived into the shadows between the buildings.

Imaro lands under ***the irimu.*** When he hit the ground, the shock forced the air out of his lungs. One of his ***chipimbere*** 's hind legs crashed dangerously close to his head.

The irimu growled in triumph as he bent over him. The upper part of his body was protected by a light cuirass. Human but cat-powered muscles raced under his tawny coat. A yellow mane framed his broad face.

Imaro was immobilized under his own shield. He still had his sword in his hand. He released her as ***the irimu's*** jaws plunged, ready to close around his throat. Imaro's fist crashed into him.

The ***irimu*** 's head tilted back. Blood squirted from his broken nose as he swayed, having lost his balance. Using his knees for leverage, Imaro threw the lion-demon away. With an agility rivaling that of his ancestors, ***the irimu*** straightened up suddenly and was about to pounce again on Imaro, but he was already on his feet.

his feet, sword in hand. ***The irimu*** roared a cry of defiance. You could guess syllables in his roar, but Imaro didn't understand the language.

The irimu took out his sword and lunged at Imaro. A clawed hand shoots out in an attempt to push the Ilyassai's shield aside. The tactic was proven and, for the lion-demon, Imaro was a man like any other, nothing more. ***The irimu*** began to pull with all its irresistible force. Planting his feet firmly on the ground, Imaro wrenched the shield from the lion-demon's Their swords clashed, but Imaro deflected the irimu's blade with a ***pinwheel*** before sinking his own into his opponent's stomach. He wasted no time savoring the bewildered expression he read in ***the irimu's eyes.*** He quickly pulled out his sword and a rain of blood and guts poured to the ground a moment before the lion-demon collapsed in turn.

He saw a moving shadow out of the corner of his eye. He moved aside to avoid the ***Chipimbere,*** which panicked and charged as erratically as its wild ancestors. The animal would be just as much of a danger to Imaro as it was to his opponents until he could regain control of it.

He swore in frustration. When he had flown over the battles with the Lightning Bird, he had seen the entire battlefield. But now that he was unmounted and surrounded by a maelstrom ***of irimu, nyuvha-ya chipimbere*** and Abamba, he found himself disoriented and unable to see the big picture .

Three ***irimu*** suddenly threw themselves on him. Gathering his strength and clutching his blade with both hands, Imaro called on the Cloud Walker who had touched him in his mother's womb to come to his aid, as the Lightning Bird had done. .

It was the first time he had acknowledged his connection to the Cloud Strider, his other father. As an ***irimu lunged*** at him, the warrior wondered if he hadn't waited too long before claiming this heritage.

Solosha was moving faster than ever. Against Shingane, he had made use of his speed. Against the ***irimu,*** speed was again the key to his survival. He dodged, parried, and twisted, dodging killing blows. Whenever the opportunity presented itself – a briefly exposed piece of flesh or a slightly too slow arm, the point of his spear bit down mercilessly.

Ngwika surrounded the young ***nkosi*** struggling with the lion-demons. The ***irimu*** tore shields as if they were cloth, broke spear shafts, smashed skulls with their paws, but

yet Solosha's men held on. They refused to engage in inevitably unequal duels against their inhuman enemies.
When a Galeka fell, two others took their place, their battle cries mingling with the roars of the ***irimu.*** Despite the carnage they caused, the number of lion-demons dwindled visibly, like that of the Abamba.

Solosha and his warriors were closing in on Imaro. They saw him from time to time, until he disappeared completely, when ***the irimu unseated him .***

When Solosha saw Imaro fall, he parried the blade of ***the attacking irimu .*** He thought fleetingly of Nomvula and Nkwana. But he acts all the same. Almost too quickly for the eye to follow, he ran his blade through his opponent's arm. Roaring in fear, ***the irimu*** dropped his weapon. Its other leg slammed into Solosha, but Solosha stopped it with the shield, following the blow more than trying to push it away. Another Ngwika thrust his spear into the back of ***the irimu.***

It was Gobane who had delivered the finishing blow, but Solosha had no time to thank his brother. With a voice that split the roars of the ***irimu,*** the ***nkosi*** shouted.

"Our ***izizalwana*** needs us!" Save Imaro! ***Pakati! Pakati!***

As Imaro prepared to take the onslaught of ***the irimu,*** he felt his ***chipimbere*** coming up behind him. In its blind fury, the animal had circled, miraculously escaping death. Imaro made his decision on the spot.

For a second he was the immobile target of ***the irimu.*** A moment later, he was gone. Unable to break its momentum, ***the irimu*** crashed into the ***chipimbere.*** The steel-sheathed horn snapped the demon-lion's ribs and sent the beast flying right into the midst of its kin. Roaring with rage, two ***irimu dodged*** the flying carcass and closed in on Imaro. This one was curled up near the ***chipimbere,*** now motionless. The little red eyes of the rhinoceros were terrified, seized with fear. Imaro felt the attack of the ***irimu.*** He slid his sword back into its sheath and tossed his shield so dented it was useless. He grabbed the pommel of the saddle and hoisted himself onto the ***Chipimbere*** 's back before it had time to react. He leaned forward, grabbed one rein, then the other. He then pulled violently, nearly cracking the animal's jaw, but thus forcing its attention.

To feel a rider master him reassured the beast, which stopped trembling. Imaro whispered a few words in her ear to soothe her. It was time to face the two ***irimu*** that swooped down on them.

The warrior's sword was still in its scabbard. With a whim, the ***chipimbere*** settled the case of the first ***irimu,*** sending him flying through the air, his skull in mush. The other managed to put a hand on the saddle, a paw on the sides of the animal and darted forward, aiming at Imaro's thigh with his fangs.

Imaro passed the reins in one hand. His other hand sagged and his steely fingers closed around ***the irimu's mane.*** Pulling with all his might, Imaro kept the jaws from closing on his thigh, but the lion-demon remained impossible to dislodge from the saddle.

The ***chipimbere*** mowed down the other ***irimu*** with great blows of its horn, and its sudden movements prevented Imaro from releasing the reins even for a second, and thus from seizing his sword. He had to act quickly because other ***irimu*** were coming. He saw Abamba's group coming towards him. A spear flashed. A strangled cry erupted from ***the irimu's throat.***

The animal slid to the ground, an ngwika spear in its back. Imaro was unable to decipher Solosha's gaze. Time was running out. More ***irimu*** were coming. Finally grabbing his sword, Imaro parried the blow of a new assailant who had avoided the ***chipimbere's horn.***

Why did you save my life when I failed to save your father's? Imaro wondered.

The next moment, there was no more time to ask questions.

A slight lull fell on the battlefield. The ***irimu*** retreated, their rational side prevailing over their bestial fury.

Their losses had been far greater than they imagined. For the first time, the demon-lions came to question the wisdom of their decision to fight on the side of the Erriten. Too many of them had already perished, and they had not forgotten the fate of the contingent that had participated in the disastrous invasion of Kitwana.

Imaro used the lull to tally his losses, which were huge. There were only seven ***chipimbere left,*** all seriously injured.

Their riders weren't much better. The corpses of the ***irimu*** littered the plain, but they were far fewer in number than those of humans.

Survivors rested, leaning on their spears, or sang dirges above the corpses of fallen relatives.

Burials and ceremonies of commendation to ancestors would come later… if there were survivors left to perform the rituals.

The sound of fighting continuing on the army's flanks reached the ears of humans and ***irimu*** in a cacophony muffled by the distance. The center of the battle had become the eye of the storm.

Imaro and Solosha stood face to face, in the shadow of the ***Ilyassai*** 's chipimbere side. The animal was still on its feet, but its head was hanging heavily. His sides were covered with wounds. The two warriors were talking calmly.

"I owe you my life," Imaro said.

Solosha stared at him, but said nothing.

"Your father is still dead," Imaro said. What changed ?

“Your father may be dying.

It was Imaro's turn to fall silent.

- What changed ? Solosha continued. Look around you, ***izizalwana.*** Look at all these deaths of my clan, of my tribe. Should their families and relatives hate me because I led his men here and they died there? If my father had survived his duel against Shingane, he could have been struck down here, as Mkwayo was. The real culprit of my father's death is not you. The culprit is ***there,*** he said, pointing to the Upper City.

Imaro nodded slowly.

"I never knew my father the way you knew yours," Imaro said. I don't know what it will do to me if he dies.

Solosha turned away so as not to see the fear and confusion that read in the eyes of his ***izizalwana.***

"Things can't be the same between us anymore," the young ***nkosi whispered.*** More like they were on our journey to the land of the Tsubi. But I don't hate you. I'm no better than you.

He explained to Imaro how he almost killed Bengeshe. Imaro listened impassively, and he nodded when Solosha finished his story.

Imaro told him about his experience with the Lightning Bird. While telling him this story, Imaro's eyes went to the sky, but he saw no trace of the bird.

He spoke of what he had seen: the ***inguluku,*** the acolytes, and the Naglopa running towards the ramparts. And he told Solosha of his plan involving the

mountaineers…

"I'm going to need a runner to tell them what to do,
concludes Imaro.

For a long moment, Solosha stared at him. You would have said to see him that he had never smiled once in his life.

"Most will die," he said finally. Do you really think they will do this what will you ask them to do?

“Yes,” Imaro replied abruptly. They no longer want to live hidden in the mountains. They will understand that this is the only way for them to be able to be free one day.

"I'll send Gobane," Solosha said after a few moments of thought.

The ***chipimbere cocked*** his head. His nostrils quivered, he snorted and nervously stomped on the ground. Imaro and Solosha saw as the ***irimu*** stirred. Squads of Naama were joining them. The lull was at an end.

Solosha called out to Gobane as Imaro barked out orders in the Highland and Maguvurunde languages. Spears were brandished, shields laid out, and warriors and soldiers forced themselves to their feet and returned to battle.

Mkwayo was lying on a litter made of spare clothes. He was shirtless except for the bandage the kandisa had wrapped around his wound. His eyes stared up at the sky, without energy. He heard the distant crash of battle.

Katisa was with him. Her eyes reflected her concern over her husband's inexplicable apathy. He had been injured many times in the past, but never such a serious injury. It was as if the arrow that had grazed his heart had also penetrated his soul...

Amanyani soldiers and Ngwika warriors stood guard around the royal couple. When Katisa's eyes weren't on the monomatapa, she watched the guards. She could see that they were burning with the desire to participate in the battle. And she knew that Mkwayo thought exactly the same.

She put a hand on his forehead.

“ It's Imaro's fight now,” she said. Victory or defeat is up to him now. Don't feel guilty that this battle is no longer yours.

Mkwayo says nothing. But he slowly raised a hand and squeezed Katisa's fingers between his own.

29.

THE WIND IS TURNING

The tide of some battles sometimes changes abruptly, turning a disputed confrontation into a sudden rout. Sometimes things take longer, and feel like a slow erosion. The beginning of the end of the battle between the army of the monomatapa and the Naama was more like the second scenario. When the sun began its course towards the horizon, the tenacity of the invaders had not weakened, and the outcome of the confrontation had become clear to those who knew how to observe… like Guat-tshu.

Commander ***Naama*** was motionless, seated on his ***otibi,*** his aides-de-camp nervously standing beside him. They were perched on an eminence close to the plateau, which allowed them to have a clear and complete view of the battlefield.

Guat-tshu hated to see the reverses suffered by his forces. The repeated assurances of the Masters during all these rains were worth nothing. The presence of the irimu , ***unthlatu*** and ***izingogo*** had not been enough to assure them of victory. The Naama's inhuman allies were only delaying a defeat that was becoming a little more inevitable with each passing second.

As for the gigantic warrior who wore a cuirass stamped with the bird's emblem and fought on his rhinoceros… Guat-tshu had spread the word. Kill him at all costs. In vain. The warrior seemed possessed by one of those accursed Cloud Striders, as hated in Naama as the Mashataan were elsewhere.

Guat-tshu looked away from the battle. His gaze focused on the back, where the acolytes were waiting with the ***inguluku.*** The time to release the reptiles was long past. Yet not a word from Chilule had reached him to order him to attack.

Where did your mchawi go? thought the commander bitterly. He had no doubts about the power of Erriten magic. He had known her since

his childhood spent in the Lower City. The power of the Erriten was as evident as the presence of the ocean beyond the lands of the Reaches.

But now...

Guat-tshu spurred his ***otibi*** and rushed to the rear of the battlefield. His aides widened their eyes in fear as they saw him act the so.

"I'm not deserting, I'm just going to see why the ***inguluku*** haven't were not attacked.

He rode away quickly, his mount sending little clouds of dust flying behind him. “May the Mashataan help us,” one of the aides muttered.

The others nodded, then returned to their observation of the battlefield.

Chilule was almost an Erriten. At another time, he would have already received his sphere and taken his place among the Great Wizards. But this was the long-awaited time when the barrier that kept the Mashataan out of the Nyumbani's sphere of existence was about to burst. The elevation of an acolyte, even as advanced as Chilule, would have to wait.

Chilule was therefore limited in his use of ***mchawi.*** He could help the other acolytes control the ***inguluku,*** or serve as a relay for the power of the Erriten. He knew that his masters possessed enough power to sweep the enemy army from the plain. If the kandisa fleet hadn't arrived, he was sure the Erriten would have, mostly through him, though other acolytes would have had a role to play. He longed to feel the full power of the ***mchawi*** flowing into his newly transformed body. But he was unable to contact his masters. It was as if an insurmountable wall had suddenly risen between his mind and theirs.

Have they abandoned us?

Chilule's companions detected his thought and turned their heads in his direction. For a moment, the acolytes' control over the ***inguluku wanes .*** The gigantic carnivores began to growl, hiss and wag their tails in their anger.

- Do not relax! Chilule barked.

He was First of the Acolytes, and his authority over them was equal to that of Chibenguela among the Masters. The others concentrated again

on their task. The ***inguluku*** became calm and silent again, like stone statues.

Chilule saw Guat-tshu arrive. He knew the commander was going to ask him to let go of the ***inguluku*** to save the army from imminent rout. Chilule would have done the same if he had been in her shoes.

His eyes moved to the top of the plateau. Even though he didn't have access to the thoughts of the Erriten, he could guess what was going on in the Upper City. And he knew what he was going to answer to Guat-tshu's request.

Tshingi and the Naglopa knelt in a semicircle, facing the Umbane Mountains. The leader was in the center, eyes closed, arms outstretched, palms upturned. They were not singing or chanting, but the Naglopa were still praying.

They did not pray to the Mashataan, as the banished had rejected the Demon Gods of the Naama. Nor did they seek the blessings of the innumerable gods and ancestors of the Abamba, for the names of the tribal deities could not be spoken in the Lowlands.

They therefore prayed to the spirits of the mountains of this harsh, inhospitable region, which gave them shelter and food. The mountains were strong and durable; a fortress that the enemies of the Naglopa had never managed to penetrate, until recently.

The mountains had also given them Imaro, who had shown them how to use the Umbane to defeat the invaders. Now Imaro had brought them out of the mountain to face an uncertain fate in the Lowlands.

The night runners remained silent as the battle raged in the distance. Each of the Naglopa communed privately with the spirits of the Umbane. Everyone knew he might never see the mountains again.

They had received a message from Imaro… The warrior needed the Naglopa to accomplish a mission that would help the northern forces defeat the Naama. What he was asking for was perilous, and the Naglopa were in danger of losing their lives. But they also knew that not even the mountains could protect those Tshingi and his people had left behind if the Naama won the war.

Tshingi remembered once again the day when he had met Imaro, fighting alone against ***the inguluku.*** He remembered his decision to come to the warrior's aid. He saw where it had taken him, and his people with him. It was

too late to blame himself…and anyway, he had gotten rid of his regrets a long time ago.

He opened his eyes, lowered his hands and stood up. The other warriors, for that was what they had become, stood up in turn. They were ready to do what Imaro asked.

From a distance, Pomphis saw the night runners, and he bowed his head in sadness...

"Did I hear you correctly?" Guat-tshu asked, visibly incredulous.

There was a dangerous gleam in his eyes as he looked at Chilule.

"Yes," replied the acolyte calmly.

Guat-tshu's hand went to the hilt of his sword. He found himself wishing he hadn't gotten off his mount before addressing Chilule, because at that moment he would have crushed the acolyte with undisguised pleasure.

"Why do you refuse to release the ***inguluku ?"*** asked Guat-tshu. More orders from the Masters?

He had dropped these last words in a tone full of irony. Guat tshu was beginning to doubt that the acolyte was truly speaking on behalf of the Erriten.

"Do you think the lives of your soldiers are all that matters in this war?" said Chilule in a curt tone. You should have defeated that bunch of barefoot scum from the North without needing the ***inguluku.*** Didn't we give you the ***irimu,*** and more?

“If your plans had gone as planned, then this battle wouldn't have been necessary,” Guat-tshu retorted, raising his voice. We need those creatures ***now*** or we're going to get our last one slaughtered!

Undaunted, Chilule motioned for the commander to look at the cliff face behind him. It was sheer, but split by a black, gaping wound, a passage that gave access to the Upper City.

"We need the ***inguluku*** to protect the entrance to the cliff," Chilule said. The lives of all your soldiers are a small price to pay to prevent the invaders from entering the Upper City.

Guat-tshu drew his sword. His eyes had become two slits of hatred as he listened to the acolyte.

Chilule's eyes clouded at that moment, as if he saw something other than the commander's silhouette. Behind the acolyte, one of the ***inguluku***

stirred. Guat-tshu knew the animal would pounce on him the second he attacked Chilule. But he did not put his sword back in its sheath. Chilule's vision became clear again. This time his eyes focused on a point beyond Guat-tshu's shoulder.

"Looks like some of your soldiers are fleeing the battle," the acolyte said.

Guat-tshu turned quickly to look in the direction indicated by Chilule. He saw a small group of men wearing Naama armor coming at full speed. They were being chased by a larger group. The distance between the two groups was increasing, as if the first were running faster.

As Guat-tshu blinked trying to figure out who was first, they stilled and began to spin slingshots above their heads. Guat-tshu had never seen such weapons, but he immediately understood their purpose.

- Down ! he shouted at Chilule a second before diving himself.

His warning came too late. Stones fell on the heads of the acolytes and the ***inguluku,*** breaking the concentration of the former and tearing the latter from their artificial torpor.

Led by Imaro and Solosha, the Abamba warriors finally broke the ***irimu.*** Four ***more Chipimbere*** died, bringing to three the number of survivors out of the dozens who had marched from Mji-Amanyani. The victory had been dearly won. Abamba bodies were scattered like so many leaves torn from trees during a storm. The ***irimu*** had refused to retreat. The last demon lion had fallen just as the sun was sinking below the horizon.

Solosha was leaning on her spear and her breath was heavy. He had cheated death more times than he could count. But he was so exhausted that he could hardly raise his head to watch the swirling melee that signaled the rout of the rest of the Naama army.

Unlike the ***irimu,*** the other Erriten units retreated. Humans and ***Unthlatu*** continued to fight sporadically. The ***izingogo*** had long since fled the chaos that ensued when the acolytes lost control of the ***inguluku.***

The untamed reptiles had blindly melted into the ranks of the Naama, causing terrifying damage.

Solosha looked at Imaro, who showed no signs of fatigue despite having fought harder than anyone. He was sitting on his ***chipimbere.*** His armor was slashed, dented, and his limbs were sticky with blood. But his eyes were clear as he stared at the tray.

"Thinking of going," Solosha said, following her gaze.

"That's where Bohu is."

“Remember what he did to you.

“This time, I know what to expect.

"I'll come with you," a voice said.

Imaro and Solosha turned to see Bengeshe. ***The umuti*** had a spear and an abamba shield. Maguvurunde armor covered his mutilated torso. Protected by her magic, Bengeshe had participated in the battle and killed several enemies.

"They still have their wild beasts, and their ***mchawi,*** " Solosha went on, after briefly nodding to Bengeshe.

“We survived in sufficient numbers to defeat the animals.
Quant or ***magician,*** Bengeshe est là, et la kandisa.

"But we don't know if that Queen of the North has come," Solosha said.

- She's there.

- How do you know ?

Imaro raised his sword arm. The last sunset lights came to shine
on his wristband.

— I smell Bohu with that, he says, but I also smell the kandisa. She's there.

Solosha had no more arguments to oppose him. He looked at the tray. He thought he saw a faint greenish glow at the top.

— Imaro ! Imaro !

The warrior turned to see who had called him that. A small figure was coming in his direction, nimbly dodging the corpses sprawled in his path.

"Pomphis," Imaro whispered softly, saying nothing else until the Bambuti had joined them.

“I was with the Naglopa,” Pomphis said after catching his breath. I translated your message to them, as you must have guessed.

He paused for a moment and looked at Imaro sadly.

“You sent them to their deaths, Imaro.

- I had no choice.

He briefly explained to Pomphis what he had seen through the eyes of the Lightning Bird.

"You're beginning to think like a king, Imaro," Pomphis said.

“There's a path that leads to the Upper City. It's near where they kept their ***inguluku,*** Imaro said, ignoring Pomphis' remark. Lightning Bird showed it to me. That's where I'm going.

"I'll come with you," said Pomphis.

“Me too,” Solosha added.

“As well as me, benematapa.

The newcomer who had spoken these words was Betserai, the ***mtekwa*** amanyani who had replaced Msipo as commander. He had come to report to Imaro on the battle, and had overheard the conversation with Pomphis.

"Anyone who is still able to carry a weapon will march with you on the Upper City," Betserai swore to him.

Imaro nodded slowly.

- So come.

He bent down and hoisted Pomphis into the saddle, where he crouched. The position was quite awkward and the Bambuti's legs were barely as wide as the animal's back.

Imaro pushed his mount forward. At a slow pace, the ***chipimbere*** led a column of warriors and soldiers that advanced towards the plateau, swelling a little more with each step, as more warriors joined the horde.

They increased the pace as they approached their destination. Sounds of battle echoed in their ears, though in the deepening darkness they could only see dark figures moving at the foot of the plateau.

Imaro, Betserai and Solosha arranged their troops in battle order. They knew what they were going to face: carnivorous reptiles bigger than lions, and no longer controlled by the will of the Erriten acolytes if the Naglopa had succeeded in their mission. They also knew that many would be those who would lose their lives in this confrontation. But that didn't stop them.

The roar-hiss of the ***inguluku*** was familiar to Imaro now. He curses himself inside; he had hoped that the ***inguluku would*** flee the battlefield once free from the influence of the

sidekicks. He heard other noises, however, long before his eyes could tell him who the deadly clashing ones were. He finally heard the lions roaring, and another animal whose bellows and throat clearings were reminiscent of ***chipimberians.*** Imaro had only heard those cries once or twice during his years at Cush. They were definitely more familiar to Pomphis.

"Do you hear the ***gunkwu,*** Imaro?" cried the Bambuti. It means that the kandisa troops are here!

Imaro and the others approached and quickly saw the shapes of the gigantic Cushite war animals. The smallest of the ***gunkwu*** was almost two ***chipimbere*** in height. Between the ***gunkwu*** and the attacks of the war lions, the ***inguluku*** could not hope to win, however fierce they were.

Imaro and his men stepped over the corpses of several warriors clad in naama breastplates. Some were real Naama, others were Naglopa in disguise.

Imaro's scheme had been confusingly simple. The Naglopa being so close to the Naama from a physical point of view, Imaro had thought that they would not be noticed if they crossed the battlefield in the direction of the plateau. The Naama would be far more occupied with ensuring their own survival than trying to spot near-legendary half-bloods.

The Naamas, however, had been more observant than Imaro had thought and had foiled the ruse. The Naglopa had barely had time to reach the plateau and mow down the acolytes and the ***inguluku.*** They were then massacred before the Cushites could come to their rescue.

However, they had accomplished their mission. The acolytes no longer controlled the ***inguluku ,*** and the Cushites had found the board in chaos upon their arrival. Without the intervention of the kandisa forces, Imaro's troops would have had to fight a steel path between panicked Naama and panicked ***inguluku*** to reach the entrance to the Upper City. While maintaining…

Imaro immobilized his ***chipimbere.*** Even in the half-light, he recognized Tshingi's mutilated corpse. He dismounted from his mount and knelt beside the corpse.

“You shouldn't have joined the others, my friend,” the warrior whispered. I told you you looked too much like an Abamba; we can hardly guess your naama origins… As for me with the Ilyassai.

He shook his head sadly. Tshingi and his people had saved his life. And how had he rewarded them? He remembered the words of Pomphis: ***You begin to think like a king...***

There were still Naglopa in the mountains… Women, children, men too old to be part of the expedition and finally isolated groups who had not responded to Tshingi's call to join the marching army. . Of all those who had accompanied the chief, not one had survived.

You begin to think like a king...

For the first time, Imaro contemplated what his destiny would be if Mkwayo survived his injury.

"Tshingi… When all this is over, there will be a place for your people somewhere other than the mountains, he promised.

Then he straightened up and climbed back into the saddle. He galloped to meet the commanders of the Cushite forces, whose men and beasts of war had killed all the ***inguluku.*** The surviving Naamas and their allies surrendered peacefully.

The battle was won.

Imaro said nothing to Pomphis. The Bambuti had guessed what his friend. And he knew Imaro's biggest fight was yet to come.

The Mashataan threw themselves on the barrier which separated them from the sphere of existence of the Nyumbani like gigantic bulls with shapeless contours. Their frustrations with the Erriten's stubbornness compelled them to act with physical force rather than subtle machinations.

Only the power of the Erriten held the barrier in place against the Mashataan. The Erriten who had spent so much of their fleeting lives preparing for the return of the Mashataan, and who now struggled with all their might to strengthen the barrier against their Masters.

All promises and pretenses of the Mashataan were forgotten now. The Erriten knew very well what would happen if their Masters breached the barrier. They held it with the strength born of despair, but it was a borrowed strength that would soon return to its true source.

The Mashataan were pushing.

The Erriten were weakening.

The barrier bent...

30.
IN THE HIGH CITY

In pitch darkness, Rakhma and the kandisa climbed the rough steps of the passageway that led to the Upper City. The spiral staircase was dug out of the heart of the rock.

Rakhma always wore the kandisa. The two Cushites were preceded by their Abamba guides. Rakhma clutched firmly in one hand the end of a length of cloth made from the blanket he had used to wrap the kandisa. The slaves held the other end and tugged insistently for the Cushites to force the pace.

The commander still didn't know if he should trust the silent Abamba.
How can they know where they are leading us?
They're just slaves… The

moment that thought occurred to her, Rakhma felt a warm, comforting touch enter her mind and dispel her doubts. The kandisa reassured him in the only way she could. She had become so intangible that only the shape of her limbs pressed against his body confirmed to him that he was not carrying a pile of stuff.

He gently touched her frail body before responding once again to the pressure of the improvised rope.

Even though the kandisa's mind and brain continued to occupy the damaged shell that her body had become, she felt no pain or fatigue. When the moment came to separate from her bodily being, she would be ready. She had been preparing for it since she was a little girl, younger than her daughter was now.

She found herself wishing she could tell Rakhma what she had learned from probing the minds of their guides. If she had succeeded, the half-persistent doubts of the latter would have disappeared. But she couldn't; she had not the slightest strength to spare. She remained only very briefly in contact with Rakhma's spirit.

If the guides knew the staircase so well, it was because they had taken it countless times, in darkness blacker than night. They were among those in charge of leading the chained prisoners to the Upper City, where they left their burden just outside the walls of the Erriten palace. The gigantic edifice was the only building in the Upper City, covering its entire surface. Once inside the walls, the captives were never seen again.

Obedience was the price of life for all the Abamba of the Naama. When the slaves guiding them had first been tasked with escorting captives without any enlightenment, they had acquiesced, and they had learned. Many of their companions had perished, falling into the precipices that suddenly appeared between the steps and the walls of the tunnel.

The slaves had never questioned the motives which drove their masters to carry out such a secret trafficking of victims in the darkness. The Erriten could have claimed their prey openly, but such things were never discussed, especially with slaves.

The eight slaves leading them up knew the fate of many of the prisoners they had escorted, and more. They knew that the prisoners, mostly Abamba, like themselves, were used as fuel. For the Erriten fed on the souls of their captives. Their power did not come to them solely from the emerald spheres.

The minds of the guides were open to the scrutiny of the kandisa. She knew, however, that it would have been easy for them to block access to their minds as they blocked it to the Erriten. They let him know who they were, and what they were.

The slaves were descendants ***of umuti,*** sorcerers from the Highlands, captured by the Naama dozens of rains ago. One could still guess in them a certain affinity with the elements, even if it had been attenuated by dozens of rains of merciless slavery.

The descendants of the ***umuti*** had carefully cultivated a facade of servility. They were systematically given the vilest and most thankless tasks, which they carried out without question. Scorned by their masters, mocked by their peers, no one had ever suspected them of having retained the talents and knowledge of their ancestors. And they

had never had the opportunity to use this knowledge…until now.

The spirits of heaven and earth, whose influence was almost nil in a region drowned in ***mchawi,*** had succeeded in reaching the descendants of the ***umuti.*** The message they brought was brief, but clear: ***The wait is over… Change will happen.***

And that was what had happened.

The armada in the harbor… The rumors of a vast Abamba army arriving from the mountains of the North… The darkness spreading like smoke from the Upper City…

But it was the presence of the kandisa… The power that emanated from her, however weak, that had resonated intuitively in them. The ***tawa*** she had used to shield the armada from the Erriten's web had awakened the latent abilities that slumbered in the souls of these slaves. Their senses were awakened and they knew what they had to do. They had searched and found the kandisa in the deserted streets of the Lower City.

The opening leading to the southern passage was unguarded. Sentinels were useless: fear was the Erriten's best protection.
But the children of the ***umuti*** did not know fear, and they dragged the kandisa and Rakhma into the passage.

The kandisa read all this and more in their minds as they ascended to the plateau. A wordless sympathy passed between them as what was left of his ***tawa*** took shape, and grew.

The Abamba thought they were leading her into a confrontation with the Erriten. She let them believe it. In truth, they were leading her to Imaro.

Imaro and Pomphis were at the forefront of a procession that slowly ascended a staircase located opposite to that taken by the kandisa and Rakhma. But Imaro's contingent was not advancing in darkness. Torches made from dried grass gave enough light so that the attackers did not run the risk of losing their balance on the narrow steps.

Betserai, Solosha and Bengeshe were behind Imaro and Pomphis, followed by a long line of soldiers and warriors. Although virtually all the survivors of the battle had volunteered to take part in the expedition, Imaro had ultimately retained only about two hundred men, among those who had received the fewest injuries and were, according to

their officers, the least likely to panic in the face of an ***mchawi-based attack.***

Those who remained behind had joined the Cushites in the Lower City, where they were clearing out the last pockets of resistance, before waiting.

Of those who followed Imaro, half were Abamba and the rest soldiers belonging to his father's empire; however, the numbers of the two groups were mixed. Language and cultural differences were forgotten.

Imaro had no torch. He advanced, one hand on the hilt of his sword, the other stretched above him. The bracelets gleamed faintly, reflecting the light of the torches. They were his guides. He knew they would take him to Bohu. And at the same time to the Erriten and the kandisa.

He remembered what Bohu had shown him at the Wankuza basin: Tanisha and Kilewo, alive. At the time, he had believed in a ruse, an illusion created by the ***mchawi.*** But doubt had gradually eaten away at his convictions.
He had succeeded in banishing this doubt, until the evening when he had told everything to Pomphis, when the idea had come back to haunt him, like a bloated corpse rising to the surface.

What if Bohu hadn't lied?

Imaro remembered Bohu's promise if Imaro refused to join him. If he hadn't lied, the slaughter of his family wouldn't be an illusion this time.

He had killed them once. How could he kill them again? The vision was a lie... A lie!

What if it wasn't? If Bohu was waiting for him at the top of the stairs, holding his wife and son hostage?

Nope ! Bohu was lying!

But what if it wasn't?

Lost in thought, Imaro almost tripped over a step. He resumed his ascent, following the bracelets which shouted to him that Bohu was there and whispered to him that the kandisa was there too.

Pomphis guessed what was troubling his friend. He wished he could soothe her, but he couldn't. He was unable to say whether Bohu had told the truth or not.

And if you were certain that Bohu was telling the truth, would you tell Imaro? Or is the restoration of the chephet ***even more important to you?***

The Bambuti knew the answer to this question. For a few moments, he was terribly angry with himself. Then, as he struggled to climb steps designed for taller people, Pomphis was glad he didn't know the answers to the questions that plagued Imaro.

Rakhma blinked, then raised an arm over her eyes to shield herself from the burst of emerald light that suddenly bathed the stairs and almost knocked it over. The luminosity was even stronger than that of the day. The kandisa stirred in his arms. She was getting heavier.

In front of them, the ***umuti*** were doubled over, writhing in pain, clutching their heads and bellies spasmodically. Their faces were twisted with pain, grappling with an invisible enemy. Their cries were almost inaudible, as if they were being strangled.

Rakhma put her arms around the kandisa. Kneeling with her, he wondered why he and she were spared the suffering of others.
That's when he saw the saffron-colored halo that bathed them both. He felt a violent sting pierce him, the guilt of the kandisa, who did not have enough strength to extend her protection to their guides.

The Abamba were spasming uncontrollably, unable to resist the force attacking them. One after the other, they approached the precipice and fell into the void. The last to fall was the massive woman who had led the group. His dark eyes met Rakhma's on the steps. The next moment, she had flipped.

The greenish light still shone in the conduit. Rakhma closed her eyes again, but the residual image of that green glow lingered. He then heard the echo of a laugh that made him shudder with fear. Because there was no joy in that laughter, just contempt, madness, and pain.

The laughter abruptly ceased. And the light disappeared, plunging the tunnel into darkness. Rakhma and the kandisa had not yet reached their destination. And they no longer had anyone to guide them.

Imaro stopped so suddenly that Pomphis almost ran into him.

- What's going on ? whispered the Bambuti, which seemed appropriate in a place where the walls seemed to close in on him.

- A bifurcation.

Solosha, Betserai, and Bengeshe crowded behind the Bambuti and craned their necks to see ahead of Imaro. In the dim torchlight they saw that the stairs led in three directions, each opening into the black, gaping maw of a tunnel.

"Do your bracelets tell you which one to borrow?"

The warrior advanced slowly. He passed successively in front of each opening, arms outstretched. Then he returned to his companions.

- So ? asked Pomphis.

- The three.

For a long moment no one spoke, then Solosha put the only question that arose.

— What fait-on, ***descendants ?***

"We form three groups and explore each of the tunnels," Imaro said without hesitation. You take the lead of the group on the left.
Betserai, the one in the middle, and I take the one on the right.

"Why do you want the one on the right, benematapa?" Betserai asked.

"A hunch," Imaro replied curtly.

Bengeshe shot him a look that implied she knew what he was up to. had not formulated. He pretended he hadn't seen her.

Almost all the men wanted to be in Imaro's group. Suppressing a surge of anger, he carried out an arbitrary division of the workforce. Imaro's group, which included Pomphis and Bengeshe, set off first. The others quickly followed his lead, placing a cautious foot on the steps. Their grass supply for the torches was getting dangerously low...

It was when the last man had entered that the stairs began to shake under their feet. A roar like the groan of a giant resounded in the three guts. Imaro heard the terrified screams of the men behind him and in the other tunnels as gigantic blocks of stone began to fall from the ceiling...

The kandisa tore herself from Rakhma's embrace. The commander was so surprised at her strength that she was out of his arms before he could react. He realized that the darkness around them was pushed back by a golden halo that emanated from the kandisa's body.

Rakhma narrowed her eyes as she got used to the sudden brightness.

“Nefkhari,” he said, his voice almost fearful.

For the woman beside him was no longer the frail, almost intangible shadow he had carried from the ***Khaiyah.*** She had regained much of her vitality. And as she slammed what was left of the sheet against her body, there emanated a glow from her that pushed back the oppressive darkness of the tunnel.

Rakhma dropped to one knee and bowed her head.

"Ha-Nala," he said humbly.

He was overwhelmed with shame at having said the kandisa's real name so many times. Then he felt her hand touch his, and squeeze it. She made him sit up. He looked into her golden eyes.
It was like watching the sun at dawn.

"They gave me their souls," she said, in a voice that pierced a of humility different from that of Rakhma a few seconds earlier.

"Who, Ha-Nala?" he asked.

The kandisa showed the void into which the children of the ***umuti had fallen.***

“Dying, they transferred the power of their ancestors to me.

"And now?"

“Now it's time to get it over with.

Still holding his hand in hers, she led him up the steps, towards the place from where the laughter had burst.

Bohu expands his consciousness to encompass the Upper City in its entirety. He no longer needed to shield his thoughts from the Erriten. The Masters were fully occupied in preserving this barrier which they had tried so hard to break down. Bohu found the irony particularly amusing.

He saw the kandisa as a point of light approaching and rising like a star at midnight. He marveled at her strength as he fully understood what it had cost him to use his ***tawa*** in this way. And yet, inflexible, she continued her ascent.

He saw Imaro like a comet, shining with a fire so blazing that the kandisa and the Erriten were mere candles in comparison. The boulders falling around him in the tunnels spared him and the warrior had no trouble maintaining his balance.

— The kandisa is stupid not to have told him what he really was, he whispered. I won't be so stupid. I'll tell him.

He looked at his prisoners, cowering as far away from him as they could afford.

'Soon you'll have done your job,' he said, before bursting out laughing.

The barrier that separated the Cloud Striders from the Nyumbani was so thin it was almost transparent. There was no need to strengthen it because, unlike the Mashataan, the Striders had no desire to take over other dimensions.

They knew the other barrier was weakening. If the Mashataan could break through, then, and only then, would they intervene.

The kandisa, however, had done nothing to ease the passage to the Cloud Striders. Without his help, they would be forced to break through the barrier on their own. And using such power to counter that of the Mashataan would have catastrophic consequences.

This is how they continued to rely on the kandisa and Imaro. The first, because she descended from them through dozens and dozens of generations; the second because he was a direct offspring. If these two heirs of the Cloud Striders were unable to prevent the entrance of the Mashataan, terrifying consequences were to be expected.

The Cloud Walkers stared with their golden eyes at the events unfolding in the Upper City. One of them paid particular attention to his son's progress.

And he held out his hand...

31.
“ NOT REAL ”

The tremors in the tunnel hadn't stopped, but Imaro continued to climb the steps. Behind him, he could hear the footsteps of those trying to follow him. He also heard the heart-rending screams of those crushed by the deluge of rocks.

When the tremors stopped, Imaro stilled and looked behind him. Pomphis and Bengeshe were there, along with a few warriors. He thought of Solosha, Betserai, and all the others who had gone down the tunnels. He hoped their losses hadn't been as catastrophic as his.

He was seized with remorse as he remembered their eagerness to join him. Then he pushed that thought away.

Bohu was waiting.

Only one torch was still lit. She wouldn't last long.
But when he turned around again, he realized he wouldn't need it anymore. Emerald light filtered through an opening at the end of the stairs.

"Bohu is here," he said to the others. I go. Anyone who prefers to stay here can do so. He took the last steps, the steps of which were further apart. No one stayed behind.

Just as Imaro and the others emerged onto a flat expanse, the ***mchawi*** struck them with the full impact of a gigantic invisible fist. Mouths opened to scream in pain, arms half-straightened in a gesture of protection. But the cries did not come out of the throats and the gestures remained unfinished. The invaders were all motionless, like flies caught in amber.

All but one.

Imaro was unaffected by the spell that paralyzed his companions. He saw Bohu's dark silhouette at the end of the corridor. His opponent stood

before a gate of green flames.

Imaro moved forward. The Lightning Bird on his chest plate reflected the green lightning bolt from the door. Despite the pathetic state of his armor, Imaro still presented a fearsome figure as he closed in on Bohu.

His bracelets almost made him suffer as the sensation they made run through his limbs was powerful. It was as if something ***different*** took the place of the blood in his veins, something inhuman, from somewhere else...

All traces of fatigue were gone. Each step seemed easier to him than the last. He was changing. The Cloud Strider that had touched him before he was born was affecting him again.

"You ***feel it,*** don't you?" murmured Bohu when Imaro came within three paces of him.

Imaro hadn't drawn his sword yet.

— Yes… you can feel it, I know it, repeated Bohu.

He parted the veil of darkness that hid his features. Imaro again noted the resemblance between Bohu and most Naglopa. The wizard was almost naked and his whole body was a mass of swollen muscles, those of his belly marked by a long irregular scar.

'They were all afraid to tell you the truth, Imaro,' said Bohu, raising his voice, which nevertheless remained subdued. The kandisa, the pygmy… even your mother and your father. They were all afraid to tell you how ***beyond*** them you were now. They said to themselves that if you were to learn it, you would refuse more before being a simple instrument in their hands. They were afraid that you would start using them, as they used you.

Imaro stopped. He remained silent. Bohu continued to speak.

“Learn this, Imaro: the Erriten have turned against the Mashataan.

- Why ? Imaro asked.

'Because they finally realized that the Mashataan had never intended to let them live once the barrier was crossed. And so there they are, busy trying to keep the barrier in place. They can do it, with the help of the kandisa.

"The kandisa, helping the Erriten?"

"Are they that different?" Bohu asked. Are we, you and me?

Imaro did not answer.

“You and I are beyond kandisa and Erriten, Imaro. Together we could sweep them away and open the barrier for the Mashataan. Together we could control the Mashataan once they were in our dimension. With their ***mchawi*** at our disposal, we could rule all of Nyumbani forever!

He paused, long enough to let Imaro digest his words.

"I've offered you a wedding ring before, and your answer was that," he said, pointing to the scar that ran across his stomach. I offer you this alliance again. What's your answer this time?

"I refuse," said Imaro.

- Think hard.

The wizard moved away from the wall of flames of the door. He waved his hand, and the flames disappeared. Imaro then saw the figures curled up in the back of the room thus revealed: Tanisha and Kilewo.

Imaro took a step forward. His wife and son were motionless, as were his men behind him. He hadn't seen them alive for almost two rains.

He remembered what he had seen in his home in Meroe: mutilated, decapitated, bleeding corpses.

He remembered the vision at the Wankuza basin: Tanisha and Kilewo, alive, unharmed, imprisoned.

He took another step forward. Bohu does not react. All he had to do was leave the view of his prisoners getting his message across.

She's aged, Imaro thought as he studied Tanisha's face. Small wrinkles marked the corners of his eyes and mouth. She had lost weight, and had become thin under the naama garment that covered her body. The shikaza beauty that had captivated him the day he first saw her was no longer so compelling. However, she remained Tanisha. Unless… ?

He's grown up, he thought, looking at Kilewo. His features were harsher, more like his own than his mother's now. His body was beginning to reveal the muscles that were the legacy of Imaro and Mkwayo. You could see fear in his eyes, and Imaro had sworn that his son would never know fear or pain again…

Illusion! cried a high-pitched voice in his mind. ***Lying !***

He had already been the victim of illusions in the past. He knew that Bohu had the power to take ghosts from the minds of others and present them as if they were real.

Bohu saw the doubt in Imaro's eyes. The Naama's hand moved again. The flames reappeared, this time covering only the door itself. Then they began to advance towards the woman and the child, who remained motionless and mute.

“Now choose Imaro. Join me or watch them die.

The kandisa and Rakhma approached the top of the steps. They had not been attacked since the death of their guides. The Erriten had no traps in the southern part; it was in the north that they awaited the invasion.

Rakhma marveled at how the kandisa pushed her extreme weakness away. His feet barely seemed to touch the ground now.
Rakhma also realized that he was not tired, and he began to suspect the kandisa of sharing her newfound strength with him. He wondered what would happen if that borrowed source of power ever disappeared.

They were now close to an underground entrance to the palace of the Erriten. Instead of entering, the kandisa stopped.

"The Erriten are there?" Rakhma asked.

"Yes," she answered. And there are also the Mashataan… and the Cloud Striders.

Rakhma's muscles tensed. He was a soldier, not a mage or scholar, but he sensed the cataclysmic consequences of a confrontation between such opposing forces.

- What will you do ? he asked.

He hadn't said "we", because he was well aware that his role in the restoration of the ***chephet*** was now complete.

“I'll wait for Imaro.

"Are you sure he's here?"

"He's here, and he'll come to me...despite everything."

"Despite what?"

The kandisa did not answer. Closing her eyes, she gathered her ***tawa one last time.***

Imaro was petrified. His eyes went from his wife and son to Bohu's implacable gaze. Naama's hands were up. Filaments

of green energy appeared between his fingers.

Bohu's offer held no appeal for Imaro. He had no desire to end up on the throne of the monomatapa, or to reign with the wizard on the Nyumbani. He trusted Bohu even less than an ***inguluku.*** It was obviously not Bohu's promises that made him hesitate.

He looked at Tanisha and Kilewo, motionless. He tried to read a message in their eyes, but saw nothing.

Are they real? Or an illusion?

If he helped Bohu to bring the Mashataan and defeat the Erriten to then see the images of Tanisha and Kilewo dissipate like a mist...

If he killed Bohu and they both died in pain atrocious, and that the Mashataan prevailed over the Erriten and the kandisa…

Are they real? Or an illusion?

Had his life been real? In Meroë, he had lived in a cage whose bars were made of compromise and renunciation. He was moving away from Tanisha there. And he did not know what his son was going to become. He didn't want Kilewo to be like him. But he didn't know what his son could, or should, be...

Are they real? Or an illusion?

They couldn't be real. He refused that they were real. He forced himself to remember their mutilated corpses. And those images became the reality of what he saw beyond the emerald flames.

- Choose ! cried Bohu, a cloud of ***mchawi*** now enveloping his hands.

Imaro drew his sword.

Swearing bitterly, Bohu gestured and the flames grew until completely enveloping the entrance to the cell.

An illusion.

"You moron!" raged Bohu. Have you already forgotten ***that ?***

A web of light sprang from his fingers towards Imaro. It was the same kind of canvas that had immobilized him at the Wankuza basin.

Unable to move or scream, Tanisha saw the greenish fire approaching. She knew he was going to come slowly, to snatch as much pain as possible from her and her son before consuming them. During her long period of imprisonment, she and Kilewo had come to see the flame

of Bohu as an animated creature, whose evil spells and motives were as abject as their creator.

The things she had seen… The plans Bohu had revealed to her…

She had never quite managed to get used to the horror that had nearly driven her mad when she and Kilewo were taken to the Upper City.

She remembered the day when Bohu had kidnapped them in Meroë. Imaro had left angry this morning. She knew that she was the source of his fury and had decided to put an end to their discord as soon as he returned that evening. She didn't want Imaro to teach her son the way of the warrior, but for him, she would have tried to control his emotions.

It was then that Bohu had arrived, snatching her and her son from the tranquility of their life at Cush. She remembered the terrifying nights spent in the hold of a black ship that moved faster than the wind. She remembered having seen the lands of the Reaches, and the Lower City, and the plateau of the Upper City. She hadn't seen anything of the outside world since.

Neither she nor Kilewo had been harmed during their imprisonment, but she prayed every night to the deities of Cush and Shikaza that Imaro would come to her rescue, as he had done so many times in the past. And even when the weeks had stretched into months, and the months rainy, that hope had continued to burn as brightly as the flame of ***mchawi*** that confined it.

When Tanisha finally saw Imaro just outside the door, her heart skipped a beat. jump in his chest. ***He came !***

Despite her best efforts, she couldn't break the paralyzing spell that made her mute and immobile. Bohu had never done anything like this before. She could still see and hear, however, and as she listened to the deal Bohu offered, she was certain that Imaro would agree to put an end to her and Kilewo's captivity. He could always kill Bohu later...

Bohu had never told him about the bloody scene he had left for Imaro. She didn't know that Imaro and everyone in Cush thought she and her son were dead. That it was normal for Imaro to take them for an illusion.

Resignation mixed with utter incomprehension took the place of pain and disbelief when she saw Imaro draw his sword in

response to Bohu's proposal. When the flames erupted, she wanted to let out a loud cry of despair, but it couldn't get out of her throat.

There was nothing left for her now, nothing but immeasurable misfortune that would soon be engulfed forever in the green, evil flames...

Imaro did not try to avoid the web of Bohu which invaded the space which separated them. Bohu smiled as the silky substance covered the warrior. He had no idea, however, of the changes taking place in his enemy. Imaro was only just realizing it himself.

Before the canvas enveloped him completely, Imaro raised his arms, and the filaments came to disappear in the bracelets of the kandisa. Then, all of a sudden, they threw the whole canvas back on Bohu.

The wizard's eyes widened. He exercised his will, and the ***mchawi*** web fell to the ground, where it remained like a discarded garment.

By the time Bohu turned towards Imaro, the warrior was already on top of him. Bohu prepared to dematerialize. A green halo crackled in the air around him, but too late.

Imaro struck with a force he had never had before. The tip of his blade sank through the scar of the first wound he had inflicted on Bohu. Hate contorting his features, he jerked his arm upwards. Blood spurted out from the gaping wound thus created. Bohu didn't scream as his blood flooded his enemy's limbs. His eyes were locked on Imaro's, relentless.

Bohu understood in his last seconds of life how badly he had judged his opponent. Imaro did not seek power and domination, like him. He was only looking for inner peace. And no power could have turned him away from it. Blood filled Bohu's mouth, and he was unable to speak. But he could still project his thoughts. He sent a message into Imaro's brain with all the strength he had left.

The Erriten had more wisdom than me... I should have killed you at the Cush, as they had ordered me.

Then his head sagged and his eyes rolled back. Her soul flew from her carcass as its blood was swell at Imaro's feet.

With the death of Bohu the web of ***mchawi disappeared.*** But not the flames from the door. Imaro watched them as he pulled out his blade, then he looked

her bangles. They hadn't saved him near the Wankuza basin. He didn't know the full power of it then. Now the Cloud Strider's legacy vibrated within him, touched him, ***changed him...***

Imaro looked at the enemy for whom he had crossed half a continent. The afterlife was teeming with enemies he had slain in his lifetime, N'tu-mwaa, Chitendu, Chikanda, and many others. Most deserved their death, but none more than Bohu.

He looked at the flames. What was behind? Tanisha and Kilewo had seemed so real.

What if Bohu hadn't lied?
Non !

Bohu was dead, but the bracelets were still vibrating. The kandisa was calling her. Casting a final look at the flames, Imaro turned and darted down the tunnel, passing the inert forms of Pomphis, Bengeshe and the others. He didn't know if they were still alive. It didn't matter anymore...

He entered a passage that led to another branch of the tunnel.
The bracelets were calling, and Imaro was answering. He knew exactly where he was going. Bohu's blood dripped from his sword, leaving a scarlet trail behind him.

Pomphis was the first to wake up. His head ached horribly but he sat up and looked down the hall. He saw Bohu's bleeding corpse and, behind it, the passageway in flames. He heard the screams. And he thought he recognized the voices.

Disoriented, the Bambuti advanced. He was certainly not a wizard, but had read a great deal on the subject in the Cush libraries. He knew that it was not necessary to have counter-spells to fight against magic.

Reaching the passage, he pressed his hands against the black stone slabs of the wall. He ignored the heat burning his skin. A block moved slightly under the pressure of his fingers. He rushed to the opposite wall to press the block located exactly opposite. The moment he pressed, the flames disappeared.

Pomphis was speechless at the sight before him.

32.
" KILL ME "

As he walked down the dark hallway, Imaro heard a faint sound of footsteps behind him. He turned around and saw Bengeshe. ***The umuti*** had recovered more quickly than the others from the Bohu spell and had followed Imaro. She had no weapons, and nothing in her appearance was reminiscent of the creature that frightened the Ngwika. Only his eyes revealed his true nature. They were riveted to Imaro's, and there was no fear in them, not even when the warrior's eyes narrowed dangerously at the sight of him.

"Why are you following me?"

"I have a role to play in what's to come," she said calmly.

Imaro grimaced, half rage, half regret.

"Haven't you played it already?"

He remembered Nomvula's sacrifice. If he had been conscious at that time, he would never have accepted that the young woman sacrificed herself for him. Since then, he viewed ***the umuti*** with more suspicion than gratitude.

"Not entirely," said Bengeshe. And neither do you.

Imaro knew she would continue to follow him whether he liked it or not. Although she had no weapon and seemed harassed, Imaro could see that power was accumulating in her, as it was for him.

- So come.

Without saying a word, he turned and continued down the hall.
Bengeshe followed after him, staying a few paces behind him.

Rakhma was a brave man. He had faced death so many times that it had become more of a companion than a ghost. But when he saw Imaro and Bengeshe approaching, his heart raced and his hands shook.

He had seen and talked to Imaro many times at Cush.

Before the death of his wife and son, he viewed the warrior primarily as an individual of unusual physique and hardly talkative, a view that had not changed when the kandisa revealed to him Imaro's true heritage and his role in the coming conflict against the Erriten.

But now...

Imaro approached like the incarnation of the gods of war and destruction of the Nyumbani, the body stained with the blood of the suppliants. Beneath his Amanyani helmet, his face was a dark, unreadable mask. He held his sword as if it were a purple staff.

Behind Imaro, Bengeshe, with the grimace that served as his smile, his ragged clothes and the scar instead of breasts, looked more like a demonic creature than human.

Rakhma's hand went to the hilt of his sword even though he knew his weapon would be of little use against the warrior. The kandisa's hand held him back with a tender but firm gesture.

"It's not us he's trying to kill," she said.

Imaro stopped a few steps away, imitated by Bengeshe.

"Bohu is dead," he said, without the slightest hint of triumph in his voice.

"No one will mourn him," said the kandisa.

“You knew everything that was going to happen to me, didn't you?

The kandisa did not answer immediately. The last time she saw Imaro, he was accused of murdering Tanisha and Kilewo. She knew he was innocent. It was then that she had told him about Bohu, as the warrior had sworn to hunt down the Naama and kill him.

Imaro and Bohu, she thought. ***The unpredictable factors of an elaborate conflict. One is dead, the other is alive. And now ?***

"I knew it," she said.

Imaro remained silent, his eyes black as coal.

"Do you hate me?" asked the kandisa.

"Should I?"

The kandisa did not answer. She looked at Bengeshe. Thanks to her ***tawa,*** she understood who ***the umuti was,*** what she had done and why her presence was necessary. Despite her immense reservoir of knowledge and power, the kandisa had not considered the need Bengeshe could fill, a need she had forgotten.

The two women understood each other without speaking.

"The Erriten are waiting for us," said the kandisa.

- Where ? Imaro asked.

"I'll drive you.

- As you have done since I was born?

"No," she replied dryly. You chose your own path, Imaro. You could have made other choices. You could have taken other paths at any time.

- It's what you say.

- We must go, there is no more time to lose. The Mashataans are about to break the barrier.

As she was about to go down the passage, Rakhma stepped between her and Imaro. His hand was still on the hilt of his sword. Before he could speak, the kandisa spoke up.

"No, Rakhma," she said. You went as far as you could TO DO. If you go further, you will die. And I can't accept that.

- And you ? Rakhma asked, in a tone vibrating with anguish. And you?

He didn't try to hide the pain that showed on his face, the pain of a lost love.

Imaro's eyes narrowed as the kandisa said Rakhma's name. He had never seen the Cushite commander without his mask before that day. Weariness dominated there, and his shoulders were slumped.

“I'm doing what I was born to do,” she said. You weren't born to die here, Rakhma. It will be over soon. You must stay here.

"Good, Ha-Nala," he said.

He watched Imaro and the kandisa enter the conduit that led to the Erriten Hall. Bengeshe came after them.

Queen of Life and Lord of Death, the soldier thought.

Then he shivered.

The royal hall of the Erriten was bathed in intense emerald light. The Erriten sat stiff in their granite seats, their eyes closed, their grotesque bodies naked. With suicidal determination, they continued to offer a resistance that could only end in failure.

Already the Mashataan were beginning to be visible, as if they were behind a translucent screen. Their shapes grew and contracted for no apparent reason. Sometimes they seemed to do the same

size than the Erriten. Others, they filled the space behind the barrier, like a liquid overflowing from a container that was too small.

Nothing about them approached human. Their bodies consisted of sinuous tendrils that vibrated with the purest ***mchawi .*** They had no other members. From each cluster of tendrils rose a head unlike any other Nyumbani creature. Only their eyes were recognizable as such, taking the form of countless globes of bright green light, each reflecting a detached involvement in the fight against the Erriten, those pitiful, pathetic and insignificant Erriten...

If the Erriten or the Mashataan became aware of the two figures standing at the entrance to the throne room, they did not show it.

"Imaro," said the kandisa. It's time for you to become what you were born to be.

She put her hand on the warrior's bracelets. They glowed then were bathed in incandescent golden light before sliding into Imaro's skin like water that is absorbed by the earth. He no longer felt any pain, any fatigue from the battles that had just followed one another.

A consciousness came flooding into him… Awareness of what had touched and changed him while he was still in Katisa's womb. That touch had nurtured him where all else had failed. Now he was grasping him in a way that affected every part of his body, from his skin to the marrow of his bones.

His height remained the same, but he felt like he was growing. His eyes didn't turn to specks of sunlight, but it looked like it. He was no Cloud Strider, but no human being had ever been, and ever would be, so close to being one.

Like Bohu, he was unchanged on the surface. Inside there was no words to describe the changes that had taken place in him.

His eyes met those of the kandisa.

"I must combine my power with that of the Erriten to seal the barrier," she said. I will save their lives by doing so, but they will not be grateful to me, far from it. They will use whatever power they have left to destroy those who have invaded Naama. Only you can stop them from killing those who have you, and have followed me here.

"I understand," said Imaro.

"There's another thing you need to do, too," she said, not taking her eyes off him.

She let her clothes fall to the ground. Standing naked in front of him, she continued.

'Kill me,' she said, then pointing to Bengeshe, 'and kill her too. She has a power that can make the barrier even stronger.

Imaro was unable to speak.

As the green flames disappeared, Pomphis rushed into the cell. Tanisha was curled up against the opposite wall, her back turned to protect Kilewo. The boy's arms were wrapped around his mother's neck. Both were shaking.

"Tanisha! exclaimed Pomphis, leaning to his side.

Tanisha looked up. His eyes widened in disbelief and the muscles in his body relaxed. As Pomphis held out his hand to help him regain his balance, the boy looked over his mother's shoulder.

"Uncle Pomphis!" he cried.

Kilewo tore himself away from his mother and threw himself on the Bambuti with such force that he almost knocked it over, and he squeezed it with all his might.

Pomphis managed to free an arm, which he put on Tanisha's shoulder. She shuddered, then turned and looked at him. She put a hand over his before he could remove it.

“Pomphis,” she said, her voice barely above a whisper. You ... U.S have saved. Imaro… no. He does not have…

Then she laid her head on Pomphis' shoulder and began to cry. Her sobs became spasms, so powerful that they frightened the Bambuti.
Kilewo wept too, and Pomphis kept them close until the torrent of tears subsided. Then he helped them up.

“You've been here so long,” he said. Now it's time to go. Whoever kept you prisoner here is dead.

Tears still streaming down their cheeks, Tanisha and Kilewo followed Pomphis out of their cell. When they passed Bohu's corpse, Kilewo looked away fearfully.

Not Tanisha.

Looking at the body of her jailer and executioner, she remembered Bohu's words, his offer to spare their lives. And she remembered Imaro's answer.

With that memory in mind, her tears stopped flowing. His eyes hardened. A part of her that had existed since the day she had a vision of Imaro during her rite of passage in the shikaza tribe, withered and died. And she realized that she was not mourning this disappearance.

Other people that Bohu's spell had immobilized had woken up and were now wandering the corridors, haggard. Some still had guns in their hands.

“They are friends,” Pomphis assured Tanisha, who stiffened and grabbed the Bambuti by the arm.

She had never seen Abamba warriors or soldiers from the monomatapa empire. Some men approached. Their movements were stiff, a backlash from the paralysis spell. Pomphis was surprised to see Solosha and Betserai among these survivors.

Did all the tunnels lead to the same place? he wondered.

Solosha looked at Tanisha and Kilewo curiously.

- Who is it ? he asked Pomphis.

'From Imaro's wife and son.

They spoke in Ngwika. Even though she didn't understand the tenor of the conversation, Tanisha stiffened when she heard Imaro's name. Meanwhile, Solosha remained stunned.

"I thought they were dead," he said.

- Me too. Like everyone.

He made a gesture to indicate Bohu.

“He was a bigger liar than even the kandisa suspected.

Are you sure? What did the kandisa really know?

"Where's Imaro?" Betserai asked. He may need our help.

"No," said Pomphis. There's nothing we can do but wait.

The others nodded reluctantly. They were standing, or sitting, on the green-lit floor, waiting for the end of something that no longer depended on them.

Imaro hesitated. He wasn't sure he had heard correctly. Realizing her hesitation, the kandisa understood that there was no more time to lose.

She searched the depths of Imaro's mind, pulling out what she needed to release all the fury inside him.

"Bohu didn't lie, Imaro," she said. Tanisha and Kilewo were not illusions. They were real, as real as the flames of ***mchawi*** in the cell. Your choice caused their death. Now kill me!

Bengeshe did not understand the words of the kandisa, but she understood the message. And she added a few words in her turn.

“Remember Nomvula.

Imaro's anger turned into a searing fury that distorted his features. He brandished his sword and thrust it between the kandisa's breasts, skewering it right through. His blood mingled with Bohu's on the blade. She fell backward without a sound, her body sliding on the blade.

Imaro then plunged the bloody blade into Bengeshe's mutilated torso. ***The umuti*** sagged without a word.

As the kandisa lay on the ground, an iridescent wave erupted from her wound. Imaro looked away as the golden light of the pure ***tawa*** filled the room, replacing the green ***mchawi .***

From Bengeshe's wound erupted a flame of a richer red, deeper than the blood that formed a pool around his corpse. It was ***muti,*** magic indigenous to the Nyumbani, which owed nothing to the Cloud Striders or the Mashataan.

The ***tawa*** of the kandisa and the ***muti*** of Bengeshe rose up and came to join the forces raised by the Erriten. The combination of the three strengthened the barrier, and the silhouettes of the Mashataan became more blurred.

The Mashataan redoubled their efforts, but they were not ready to face the kandisa's ***tawa .*** They had never believed that the kandisa was able to reach the Upper City. And they had failed to understand the true nature of the power she embodied.

For his soul wasn't the only one that escaped from the wound caused by Imaro's blade. In the Sakkhar, she had absorbed the spirits of all the kandisa and all the jaliyin who had ruled the Cush before her.

Since the start of the war, she had fought the Erriten only with her own ***tawa.*** More than once she had been tempted to invoke the other power within her, but she had resisted the temptation.

Only now could she release the collective ***tawa*** of all her ancestors. And the instrument of this liberation was to be the son of the Cloud Striders: Imaro.

The addition of Bengeshe's ***muti*** had strengthened the barrier a bit more. The Mashataan cursed and raged, but gradually disappeared as

that an opaque shield of golden light hovered above the Erriten spheres. One by one, the spheres darkened until no light was visible within. One after another, the Erriten dropped to their thrones.

The Mashataans were gone.

The ***chephet*** was restored.

The Erriten stretched. They felt drained and diminished. Their bond with their Masters was gone. They could already feel the pressure of their disproportionate bodies slowly suffocating them…

However, there was always a bit of ***mchawi*** in them. They understood that their dream of dominance was dead, but it also became clear that this power did not depend on the Mashataan as much as they had believed. The ***mchawi*** was ***in them,*** as the ***tawa*** of the kandisa was in her. They had discovered a truth that their dead companions in Mlongo had not had the opportunity to learn.

Chibenguela heaved himself off his throne. An emerald glow ran through its tendrils.

- Get up! he shouted to his companions. It's not over yet.
The Masters are gone! The kandisa is no more. Victory is always within reach. Look !

The heads of the Erriten lifted, and they saw the golden shield begin to disappear. The Mashataan returned to the dimension that was theirs.

- You see ! cried Chibenguela. We can still win!

"No," said Imaro. You cannot.

The Erriten turned to the warrior who had approached them. Their eyes burned him with their hatred. They began with their elephantine pace to surround Imaro. He did not try to avoid them and, on the contrary, threw himself on them like a lion attacking a herd of buffaloes.

His own hatred had been drained to make room for the ***tawa*** of his bracelets which had in turn released the Cloud Strider's legacy within him. But nothing could erase the bitterness he felt towards himself.

Tanisha and Kilewo… Dead because of me, her soul cried as her blade severed one of Chibenguela's gnarled arms.

Nomvula… dead because of me, he lamented as a blast of ***mchawi*** burned through the dried blood of his armor with no consequence other than

that.

Keteke… dead because of me, he remembered, mourning his first love, killed in Stone Village.

The throne room became a jumble of clumsy bodies, flashes of ***mchawi*** and gleaming steel. The head was the Erriten's weak point, but Imaro's sword also dug into the bulbous torsos, which spilled their innards onto the granite floor.

The warrior moved with inhuman speed, dodging most of the wizards' spears of demonic fire, but not all. Those who touched him bathed him in emerald flame. If it hadn't been for the ***tawa*** diffused through his body, he would have died, but now their effect was negligible.

When just over half of the Erriten had fallen, the rest gave in to fear. They clumsily tried to flee, but Imaro stood at the entrance of the room. They pounced on him, trying to crush him with sheer bulk. They could not escape his blade.

His sword rose and fell again after the last Erriten was dead.
A silent cry ripped from the depths of his soul echoed in the room. It was not a cry of triumph, but of lamentation. Then the voice of the kandisa whispered softly in her ear.

You will always be more than other men, Imaro... but you cannot remain as you are...

The warrior froze, his arm stopping halfway above Chibenguela's dismembered corpse. The kandisa bracelets had reappeared around her wrists. For a moment they glowed brightly, then they disappeared completely.

The extinguished Erriten spheres fell and shattered to the ground. And Imaro's conscience fled.

The kandisa spoke twice more before her mind fully integrated into the barrier.

Pomphis heard a voice that seemed to come to him from an immeasurable distance and only grew louder every second. The kandisa's voice was laced with affection and concern, and Pomphis remembered the first time he had seen her, the day his Cushite mentor had ushered him into Napata's throne room.

You have served me well, dear Pomphis… As I was sure you would. But you still have one task for me to do. You know of

what is it about...

Pomphis understood. He turned to Tanisha and Kilewo, both asleep, exhausted from their confrontation with death. Subjected to too severe a test, their nerves no longer supported them and they slept the sleep of the most total exhaustion.

Soldiers and warriors paid little attention to the Bambuti. They seemed more concerned about their vulnerability there. Not one saw Pomphis walk away and leave the room.

With the greatest difficulty, Rakhma had prevented himself from rushing after the kandisa and Imaro. She had ordered him to stay, and he had obeyed.
When she spoke to him in his mind, his heart leapt with boundless joy, but the words soon got the better of his joy.

Rakhma, beloved… The choice to enter the room is yours. You won't like what you'll find there. Nefkha needs you now, my beloved. Be as strong for our daughter as you have been for me...

His voice trailed off. Rakhma knew he would never hear it again. He considered his words for a few seconds.

Then he rushed into the hallway.

Rakhma reached the throne room of the Erriten before Pomphis. When the Bambuti arrived, he found the Cushite commander on his knees. He was bent over and his shoulders heaved as he sobbed. He had in his hands a faded piece of white cloth, all that was left of the kandisa. Her body had been completely consumed when she released the ***tawa*** it contained.

The ***muti*** of Bengeshe had not taken away his body. She was lying in a pool of blood that was getting bigger. His eyes were open, and the expression on his face serene.

As he surveyed the rest of the room, Pomphis suppressed a sudden fit of nausea as he saw and smelled the piled-up corpses of the Erriten.

Then he saw Imaro.

The warrior was as motionless as an ebony statue. His armor was charred, and blood from Erriten and other opponents caked on his skin. His sword, red from hilt to tip, hung at his side. His face was unreadable and his eyes closed.

Pomphis approached. When he looked up at the mask that was Imaro's face, tears began to stream down the cheeks of the

Bambuti.

"Oh, Imaro," he said sadly. What's left of you?

Imaro opened his eyes, staring straight ahead, unblinking. His eyes were those of a man who saw the worst in him and, much to his regret, survived the experience.

His mouth opened to utter the single word of his response.

- Nothing.

The veil of darkness that emanated from the Upper City dissipated like smoke in a high wind. For the first time in many months, the people of the Lower City could see the stars...

The darkness that reigned in the minds of the Naama also lifted, and the final fighting broke off as the survivors threw down their weapons. The few Naama who remained loyal to the Erriten and the last acolytes were killed by the Naama themselves.

An even deeper darkness dissipated from the souls of the Abamba slaves. They did not look up at the stars. They looked within themselves. And they began to rediscover who they really were...

A great golden light fills the night sky, turning it into day.
For a moment, she lit up a sea of upturned faces.
Winners and losers, all felt their hearts bathed in this soft and warm radiance.

Then the light disappeared.
The Naama was free.

33.
NEW INJURIES

"You'll have to talk to him," Pomphis said.

Tanisha's hands clenched the Bambuti's, but she refused to look him in the eye. They were seated on a mat on a canopy in the large room of a Naama merchant.

Three days had passed. The Lower City was changing from a place of fear to a sanctuary of hope. Fighters from all over the world spoke of their homeland to the curious Naama, for the Erriten had kept them in the dark about the rest of the Nyumbani, contenting themselves with telling them that it was enemy land.

Abamba slaves were now free. Many had decided to accept Solosha's invitation to join them in the Highlands, others had preferred to stay at the Naama where they had lived for generations.

A delegation of Naama and Abamba from the Lower City had gone up to the Upper City. They explored the labyrinthine palace of their former masters. When they came back down, they told no one what they had seen, but they swore to dismantle the building stone by stone, then to block all the passages leading to the plateau.

One name dominated all conversations. Imaro. Imaro, who had killed the Erriten. Imaro, the liberator of Naama. Imaro, the heir to the monomatapa throne…

Mkwayo was recovering well from his injury. He was the most powerful of the many monarchs gathered in the Lower City after the death of the kandisa, but it was Imaro's name that took on near-legendary significance.

Tanisha had neither seen nor spoken to the warrior since the fall of the Erriten. Kilewo either. Pomphis had explained to him that Imaro had found his parents, and that his origin was linked to the Cloud Striders. He had him

talked about the monomatapa empire over which he would one day rule. And he had tried to explain to her why Imaro hadn't saved them in the palace.

“He was convinced you were an illusion. It wasn't the first time he was cheated on with ***mchawi,*** you know that. If he had believed, even for a moment, that you and Kilewo were real...

“He would have left us anyway,” she said bitterly. He always preferred to kill than to love me or love his son. I didn't want to see him. I see it now.

— Tanisha…

"Answer me, Pomphis: why didn't he accept Bohu's offer, free us, then kill him?

Pomphis knew he had no satisfactory reason. He hadn't had one the first time she had asked, and he still hadn't.

His gaze met Tanisha's. There was pain in the young woman's eyes, as well as loss, and deep grief. And he noticed something he had never seen before… A tenderness for him that he had never expected to find.

“That's a question you'll have to ask Imaro,” he said, his tone he tried to keep it neutral.

“If I have to, then I will.

She released Pomphis' hand and sat up.

"Kilewo is still sleeping," she said. If he wakes up before I get back, don't tell him where I am. Pomphis stood staring at the entrance to the room long after the young woman had left.

"You have won a lot, Imaro," he whispered, "but I'm afraid you didn't lose much more...

Imaro sat in a hall of the largest mansion in the Lower City, alone. The house had belonged to Guat-tshu, commander of the Naama army. Guat-tshu dead, the monomatapa and his family now occupied it.

A platter of food lay before him: roasted lizard and a bowl of stewed cereal. He had only eaten half of it and was no longer hungry. There was also a cup of naama liqueur, much more heady than the Highland ***tshwala .*** He hadn't tasted it.

He could have asked a servant to clear the table. The Naama were eager to serve the one who had killed the Erriten. They were already many to have nicknamed him "the Liberator". He called none, and the praises of the Naamas did not reach him.

He knew that Mkwayo wanted to talk to him about a serious matter, but he had not yet been to the apartments his father and Katisa shared.

Imaro remembered…remembered what he had seen while Pomphis and Rakhma escorted him out of the Erriten throne room.

He was weak then, weaker than he had ever been. His gestures were those of an old man. Pomphis and Rakhma had supported him until they emerged in the Lower City. When he saw Kilewo and Tanisha being escorted by Solosha's warriors, he nearly lost consciousness again.

Alive! They are really alive! Bohu wasn't lying. I lied to myself...

Tanisha looked up. Their eyes had met only for a moment before she looked away.

He understood then that he had lost her forever.

The adulation given to him meant nothing. He didn't know what he was going to do.

A knock at the door made him look up. His eyes widened as he saw Tanisha.

She entered uninvited. She wore a naama garment that covered almost her entire body. His face was filled with a morose sadness that he had never seen in her. She approached slowly, obviously reluctant to be in the same room as him.

Imaro looked at her without saying anything. He was sitting cross-legged on the canopy which was the only furniture in the room. His clothing consisted of his ngwika loincloth and his scarlet ***ubu-hlalu necklace.***

Tanisha remembered the first time she had seen him, in her vision. She remembered how that vision had come true the day Imaro and his ***haramia*** had raided the caravan escorting him to Zanj where a noble who had bought her was waiting for him.

She remembered the bonds that had been woven between them, beyond carnal desire and deeper than love. She remembered many times

where they had saved each other's lives as Imaro was immersed in his quest for identity and destiny.

But she couldn't get the sight of Imaro turning away from her mind as Bohu's flames grew.

"Do you still think I'm an illusion?" she asked, breaking the uncomfortable silence.

Imaro did not answer.

"Why didn't you accept Bohu's offer, with the idea of killing him later?"

“I couldn't believe you and Kilewo were anything but illusions.

"Couldn't believe?" Or did you not want to believe?

— I had to kill Bohu. That's all that mattered then.

Tanisha remembered the darkness seen at the same time she had had her first vision of Imaro. She didn't know then what that darkness was. At first she had thought it was Pomphis. Later, she had acquired the certainty that it was Bohu. She knew now that it was actually Imaro himself.

And the last feelings she had for him died.

She broke the silence. His words were harsh, devoid of emotion.

“You will never see me again, Imaro. And the same goes for Kilewo. He cries when he hears someone mention your name. I cried because of you. But it's over. Never again !

Imaro said nothing. Tanisha could almost see the wall that was starting to rise between them. She had seen this wall forming as early as the Cush. It was now almost complete.

She couldn't bear to see the sadness deep in Imaro's eyes for one more second.

“Kilewo and I are returning to Cush with Pomphis, the one who saved us when you refused to do so.

Imaro does not react. Tanisha opened her mouth to say something else, but she realized there was nothing more to say. She made a sound that was half sob, half angry growl. Then she turned and left the room.

Imaro was alone.

Mkwayo's head rested on Katisa's lap. His injury was almost completely healed, but he was not recovering as quickly

that he had expected.

I'm getting old, he thought sadly. ***Another ten rains and I'll be an old man. But Katisa will remain young...***

Katisa knew him well enough to know what he was thinking.

“Don't worry about your age, my beloved. You will always be the same for me, in ten or twenty rains.

When that time comes, will you still say that? Mkwayo wondered silently. He squeezed her hand and gave her a sad smile.

"And Imaro?" she asked. Do you think he's gonna do what we're gonna ask?

"He should see the wisdom in such an idea," he replied. The Naama enjoy their newfound freedom, but it is never easy to shake off old habits. We know it only too well ourselves.

He became silent again, remembering Mwazwenyi and the eight ***ndaus*** rebels. Only two had survived the battle, including Mashama.

This one will give us a hard time.

“The Naama need a leader who will be respected by all. Who better to do that than Imaro? They almost worship him for killing the Erriten.

Cross the hocha la tête.

"Remember how much easier it was for me to unite the Maguvurunde once the Thunderbird flew for me?" And this experience will serve him well. One day he will be monomatapa.

I don't think so, Katisa thought. But she did not share her feelings with Mkwayo. Needless to add to his troubles at this time.

"He may not be ready to sit on a throne yet," she said.
Remember: there is the problem of his wife and son.

Mkwayo sighed and closed his eyes. Pomphis had told them everything that had happened. Katisa had even spoken briefly with Tanisha. The Shikaza had been polite, but she hadn't hidden her relief when Imaro's mother had left.

“That wound might take longer than yours to heal,” she said. Maybe we should wait...

“It will be too late then. The hatred between the Naama and the Abamba will have resurfaced. The country will once again be torn apart by war and the people easy prey for new Erriten. No, it must be now, Katisa.

"And if he refuses?"

Mkwayo looked up and almost gave an annoyed growl.

- Denied ? he repeated, incredulous. How can he refuse, after all this what has he already done?

Katisa says nothing more. Mkwayo sat up abruptly. He immediately sent two Amanyani guards to fetch Imaro.

He looked at the sad walls that surrounded him. He thought of the shimmering colors of the Highlands and Maguvurunde, reflecting a vitality the Naama had never known.

This place must change, Mkwayo thought as he waited for his son.

Solosha was with Imaro when the soldiers arrived. The Ngwika had arrived a little earlier to bring important news to his ***izizalwana.***

“You won't believe this,” he said, his face shining with excitement. The ***nkosi*** and the ***indunas*** of all the tribes in the Highlands asked me to become ***nkosi*** of the ***nkosi.*** I will become to the Highlands what your father is to Maguvurunde. The two countries ruled by members of the same family, there will never again be war, or slavery, between we.

Imaro said a few words indicating that he was happy with the new status. of Solosha, but the latter saw that Imaro's mind was elsewhere.

“You have to think about what to expect,” Solosha guessed. Everyone knows you're going to be offered the Naama throne. Only the sha'a of Azania is against it, because of your ***haramia past.*** But your father will convince him to change his mind.

"No one told me about that," Imaro said.

"Probably because of…your wife," Solosha said.

He saw the warrior's gaze harden, and he found himself wishing he hadn't said that last sentence.

"She won't be distant for very long, ***izizalwana,*** " he hastened . to add. What woman wouldn't want to sit next to a king?

Imaro was about to respond when Mkwayo's soldiers arrived. He got up and followed them, leaving Solosha alone to try to fathom his cousin's thoughts.

Tanisha thought she had exhausted all her tears. But when she returned to her room, they almost blinded her. Pomphis was still there, busy playing with Kilewo, now awake, with pebbles and

sticks. The child was laughing, a sound she never thought she would hear from new.

She felt a sudden wave of affection for Pomphis wash over her. They hadn't seen her yet. She wiped her tears from the sleeve of her dress.
She didn't want Kilewo to see that she had cried.

She began to realize how much her feelings about Pomphis had changed. At first, she had seen in him only an intruder. When she, Pomphis and Imaro set out on their long journey from the City of Madness to the eastern seaboard, her feelings hadn't changed. They had however mutually saved the life, and had finally become friends.

She had thought a lot about Imaro during his long captivity in the High City, and rarely about Pomphis. And yet it was the latter who had saved Tanisha and Kilewo, and not Imaro, who had turned away from them.

She entered. Pomphis and Kilewo looked at her. Kilewo ran over to her and buried his face in her robe before lifting his head. Pomphis looked up in turn, his eyes asking a silent question.

"Uncle Pomphis remembered our game!" said Kilewo happily. I would never have believed it, but he remembered it.

"I'm happy," Tanisha said. Tell me, Kilewo, will you go back
in your room for a while? Uncle Pomphis and I need to talk.

"It's about…" began Kilewo, his features darkening,
unable to say: “My father? »

- Yes. That's it.

She sent for the abamba servant who was helping her take care of Kilewo. The woman had done the same with the children of her master naama.
Now freed, she could do no less for the son of the Liberator.

Once Kilewo left, Tanisha turned to Pomphis.

- So ? asked the Bambuti kindly.

Tanisha told him, and her tears didn't stop falling until
she's done.

"He was like a statue," she said. He felt nothing… Neither for
me… Nor for Kilewo… The man I loved is no more. He is not anymore !

She knelt in front of the dais and hugged Pomphis. She cried again until the tears ran down the Bambuti's skin. He just held her in his arms, saying nothing, knowing that words weren't much use anymore. When Tanisha's sobs ebbed, he

continued to hold her in his arms. The young woman's head rested on his shoulders, and she didn't let him let go.

I'm sorry, Imaro, he thought.

Imaro returned from his discussion with his parents. Solosha was gone, the room was empty. Like his soul.

He had listened to Mkwayo as he confirmed the rumors Solosha had told him. With Imaro ruling over Naama, Mkwayo over Maguvurunde and Solosha over the Highlands, the southern part of Nyumbani was to be united as never before. Any further attempts by the Mashataan would be met with fierce resistance.

Imaro saw the wisdom of Mkwayo's plan, and he knew the Naama would accept him as king. But the adulation of the Naamas reminded him of the adulation he enjoyed at the Cush, and he remembered how quickly that adulation had turned to revulsion when the Cushites believed he had killed his wife and child.

He had listened to what his father had said, then his mother. He nodded when needed. And he left as quickly as he could.

He had not told them that all the thrones of the Nyumbani could not fill the void in him. He hadn't told them that nothing could soften the feeling of guilt that gnawed at him a little more every day about Tanisha and Kilewo.

Imaro sat back down. He let his thoughts take him back to the day he left the Tamburure and the Ilyassai. It had been a long time since he considered himself an Ilyassai. He understood now that he would never be anything but an Ilyassai, even if he could never return to them.

He did not yet know what he would do the next day, when the Grand Council of leaders from all the nations that had liberated the Naama would meet to discuss the terms of ending the conflict.

But he knew he would not be ruler of Naama, or any other realm.

— A man who turns his back on his family is not worthy to become King, he whispered.

In the small square room in the center of the Sakkhar, a young girl who had just become a woman was gazing with tearful eyes at the golden sphere above her head. Slowly, the glow faded, then disappeared completely. The spirits of his ancestors were gone. They

were now part of the barrier that kept the Mashataan away from the Nyumbani.

Darkness invaded the room.

Nefkha was alone.

Two hands rested gently on his shoulders. She was not surprised because she knew that these hands were those of the jackal-masked High Priest, who needed no light to orient himself in the Sakkhar.

" *We have to start over, Ha-Nala," he said softly. One day, the* chephet *will be threatened again. And again, we will have to appeal to the* tawa *of all the kandisa and all the jaliyin of the Cush, starting with yours.*

Nefkha's tears dried. She was the kandisa now, and for a moment the weight of her responsibilities threatened to crush her.
Then she remembered the last time her mother had touched her, so gently. And so she got up and followed the High Priest out of the room.

She never stumbled in the darkness that surrounded her.

34.
THE GREAT COUNCIL

Rabir carefully maneuvered the ***Maji-Kulungu*** between the warships that filled the harbor. Ships from Cush, Azania, Axum, Punt, and Engaruku vied for the place. There were also buildings with raised prows that were unfamiliar to him.
Naamas? he wondered as he headed for an empty spot on a dock.

The ***Maji-Kulungu,*** whose name meant "sea antelope", belonged to Majnun. She was the only ship left of what had once been the proud Kitwana fleet. Majnun was next to Rabir at the helm.

Rabir still could not explain the lull that had occurred one day sailing from Mlongo. It was as if the winds and waves of the Bahari had been stripped of their strength by some higher power, which needed that strength. The sails had sagged limply, and the crew had begun to worry. A strong breeze had suddenly swelled the sails a few days before and the ***Maji-Kulungu*** had finally reached its destination.

"It looks like we're coming after the battle again," Majnun said.

The Kitwanian monarch wore silver chainmail. A crest crafted from a lion's mane floated above his helmet.
"At least our side won," said Rabir.
“Looks like it.
Land, Rabir thought as his men tossed ropes to the waiting soldiers and the ***Maji-Kulungu*** docked. After spending so much time away from the Bahari during his stay in Amanyani, the Zanjian found it difficult to leave the deck of his ship so quickly. But

ship was not really his. And he longed to know what had become of Imaro, Pomphis and so many others, including the kandisa.

When they descended to the pontoon, Majnun and Rabir received cordial greetings from the ***mtekwa*** in charge of the soldiers at the wharf. When he heard the names of the new arrivals, the ***mtekwa*** became very talkative.

"You're right on time," he said. The Grand Council will begin very soon, and your presence will be welcome.

"And the war?" Majnun asked. The Erriten?

'You'll find out what's going on, and what's going to happen, at the Council.

He set out to lead the captain, the king, and their crew through the streets of the liberated Lower City.

The buildings were still so sad, but the city was transformed.
It was actually the people who had changed. Naamas and individuals from a dozen kingdoms mingled happily in the streets, celebrating liberation in as many languages. Songs and drumbeats filled the air. The Abamba taught their southern cousins the songs and dances they had forgotten after generations of captivity. We discovered ancestors in common, or we evoked the memory of some. The former slaves absorbed all this information like parched plants receiving the first showers of the rainy season.

Majnun and Rabir were won over by this contagious euphoria, and it was with a smile on their face that they approached the place where the Great Council was to be held.

Some of the Azanian soldiers walking through the streets recognized Rabir and greeted him with loud shouts. The captain returned their joyful greeting, remembering the more than tense relations that usually existed between Azania and his native Zanj.

The world has really changed.

They soon came within sight of where the largest market in the Lower City usually stood. Merchants had disappeared in favor of the personal guards of several monarchs. Soldiers and advisers stood around a cordon that surrounded the center of the square, which had been reserved for monarchs. A platform had been erected there, so that the sovereigns could dominate the assembly.

As the ***mtekwa*** men cut their way through the crowd, Rabir and Majnun craned their necks to try to see who was there.

on the platform. They saw the omal of Punt and the mbuli of Engaruku. They were seated on rugs, for the Naama did not use stools or chairs, except those found in the throne room. There was also an Axumite in uniform, seated apart from the others.

"This can't be the negus," said Rabir. It is said to be almost as old as the sha'a.

"Ras Amayehu is now the most titled noble among the Axumites," the mtekwa told ***them.*** The Negus was killed at the Battle of Mlongo.

They saw Mkwayo, Imaro and Katisa sitting together. Both men wore the Thunderbird emblem on their chest plates. Katisa was wearing the beaded crown of the dakamatapa.

Mkwayo's face was haggard, and his beard was much whiter than the last time Rabir had seen him. Imaro's face was unreadable. But his name was on everyone's lips in the marketplace.

Rabir's gaze shifted from Imaro to Azania's sha'a. The monarch was immersed in a lively discussion with Pomphis, once a clown at his court. Apparently, they had settled their quarrel.

When Rabir saw Tanisha and Kilewo sitting next to Pomphis, he jumped so violently that Majnun gave him a worried look.

- Something is wrong ? he asked.

"That woman and that child with Pomphis," he stammered. it's about the Imaro's wife and son. I thought they were dead.

Majnun looked puzzled.

"Why aren't they at Imaro's side?" he asked.

Rabir shrugged, not knowing what to conclude. He saw a Cushite he did not know, and a Naama who looked overwhelmed by events. There was also an Abamba warrior.

Rabir suddenly realized that the person he most expected see on the platform was not there.

"Where's the kandisa?" he asked.

"Gone forever," the ***mtekwa*** replied , refusing to say more.

Pomphis saw Majnun and Rabir shortly after they saw him. Cupping his hands, he called them and invited them to climb the steps.

"Who are you calling, Mavidogo?" asked the sha'a. My eyesight isn't what it used to be.

Pomphis grimaced, irritated to see the sha'a unable to call him anything else. only by the nickname he gave him during his captivity.

A small price to pay for our reconciliation, I suppose, Pomphis sighed silently.

— They are Majnun, king of Azania and Rabir, the Zanjian captain, oh king, he replied.

— Bandits and barbarians who become kings, a ***mjimja*** who has become a scholar. Old men who fight the wars devolved to the young. So much has changed, Mavidogo. But it is not finished. Hear my words, Mavidogo. It is not finished.

Pomphis nodded. His attention then turned to Majnun and Rabir, whom he greeted warmly before introducing them to the other participants of the Grand Council. It was then that the newcomers learned that the Cushite was Rakhma, who represented his kingdom in the absence of the kandisa. The Naama was Nuar-tshui, a merchant appointed spokesman for his people. The Abamba warrior was Solosha.

When he learned of Solosha's kinship with Imaro and Mkwayo, Rabir wondered if the warrior's family was a clan of gods, then he remembered the Cloud Strider who had touched Imaro.

The ambient hubbub gave way to calm when the monomatapa and Rakhma stood up. Pomphis was between them, acting as interpreter, the only man in the whole assembly to master all the spoken languages.

Mkwayo spoke. He stood straight despite his injury. The sun came to strike the Bird of Lightning on his pectoral plate which sparkled with a thousand lights.

"The victory that is ours is not yet complete," he said. It's only a beginning. We must bury the enmities of the past along with the bodies of those who fell on the battlefield. The great war is over, but we have more, much more, to do.

The east coast is still in turmoil. The seeds of destruction planted by Bohu, the Man of Darkness, bring forth a bitter harvest.
Azania and Kitwana fought well in the war. These kingdoms will have to fight equally well to bring peace to the coast
is.

Before Mkwayo began his speech, Majnun and the sha'a had had a hasty talk, but brief as it was, their exchange had been

successful. The two monarchs stood up. The sha'a spoke on behalf of the two, with a loud voice despite the advanced number of its rains.

"The peoples of the Bahari coast are merchants," he said. Merchants argue. It's in their nature. Sometimes these quarrels turn into war. But as long as we remember what we have seen here at Naama, there will be no more war on the east coast.

When Pomphis had finished translating the common speech of the two monarchs, the square was lifted by a wave of shouts of glee which only ended when Mkwayo imposed silence with a wave of his hand.

Then it was Rakhma's turn to speak.

"The kandisa has left us," he said gravely. But she's not really dead. His ***tawa*** seals the barrier that separates us from the Mashataan.

He paused and looked at Ras Amayehu.

— There is a proverb in the mountains of the North: "The sun and the moon cannot shine in the same sky." But at Naama, the sky and the moon shone together, and the curse of the Mashataan was destroyed. I spoke with Ras Amayehu, the omal and the mbuli. We agree. There will be no more war in the lands of the North.

The crowd gave more cheers as the monarchs confirmed the dires de Rakhma.

Solosha was next. His plain clothes contrasted sharply with the elaborate accoutrements of the other rulers. Even so, the look of the young ***nkosi*** was just as regal as that of the others, and his words just as effective.

“The ***mfecane*** is over,” Solosha said. For all of us. For as long as we can remember, we Abamba have lived between two shadows: the Naama and the Maguvurunde. As the rains came, we lost many of our people to our enemies to the north and south. This is now over. Any Abamba wishing to return to Maguvurunde will be welcome there. And we will live in peace with our neighbors.

The joyous songs of the Abamba drowned all the others in the square of the market, but the crowd fell silent when Nuar-tshui came forward.

It looked like the Naama was seeing the sun for the first time. Her amber-colored skin and tufts of hair contrasted with the skins

gloomy of those around him. A difference that meant less now.

"I have lived under the heel of the Erriten for so long that it is difficult to say things as I think them, but I will try.

He stared at the crowd for a moment before continuing.

“Great wrongs have been born here, we do not deny that. We know that a price will have to be paid for these wrongs. We'll pay for it, and more than that Again.

The Naama is free now. We are no longer slaves to the Erriten. When you return to your kingdoms, all will know that the Erriten and their ***mchawi*** are gone forever. And the Naama will once again be an integral part of the Nyumbani.

We also want the news of our freedom to reach the western kingdoms, from which we have been isolated for even longer than those on the east coast. The ships powered by the ***mchawi*** have all been destroyed, so now we can take out those walking with sails. Our captain, Goab-tshui, will sail along the shores of the west coast to bring news of our liberation. Naama will no longer be a country of isolation between peoples.

A thunderous applause greeted this announcement, and Nuar-tshui glanced in the direction of the monomatapa. Mkwayo replied with a slight nod.

"The Naama needs a leader," Nuar-tshui continued. For too long we have blindly obeyed the Erriten. Even though our minds were clouded by the ***mchawi,*** we still carry within us the defilement and guilt of the deeds of the Erriten. We need a man who is free from that taint.

Who better than the Liberator, the one who killed the Dark Man and the Erriten, to become our sovereign? Who to reign over the Naama, if not… Imaro?

Nuar-tshui's last word required no translation. The crowd picked up the name and chanted it. Soon people in the adjacent streets were repeating the name, and soon the entire Lower City vibrated with the repetitions of the warrior's name, which became a thunder-voiced invocation.

Imaro stood up. He towered above everyone on the platform except for Mkwayo, but even the monomatapa couldn't match the

physical presence of her son.

Imaro held out his arms for silence.

"People of Naama," he said. I only ask you one thing. As you know, people live in exile in the mountains of Umbane, north of here. They are called Naglopa. I ask you to allow them to live wherever they choose in the Lowlands, without fear of being persecuted because of their origins.

He turned and looked at Nuar-tshui.

"We agree, Liberator," said the Naama.

Another wave of cries of joy crashed over Imaro like a reef. He remained impassive. The fervor of the crowd meant nothing to him.

He couldn't see the sea of faces before him. His eyes were on Pomphis, who had returned to Tanisha and Kilewo's side. Kilewo stuck to the Bambuti. The boy refused to look at his father. Just like Tanisha.

He remembered the emerald flames that had sprung up and hid from view the anguishedly distorted faces of his wife and son in the Upper City.

Illusions, he had told himself at the time.

I am responsible for this state of affairs, he thought now.

He thought of nothing else as the crowd below beckoned him to accept the throne of Naama.

Night had fallen. Echoes of the festivities still echoed throughout the Lower City, filtering into Imaro's room where he sat alone.

He had said nothing more to the crowd in the square. He had discharged his debt to Tshingi. The emotion of the people was such that to say, or not, anything else would have been useless. People had simply assumed that his silence was assent, and that he was accepting the role he was being asked to take on.

There was little light in Imaro's room. She was as dark as the emptiness inside him.

He heard a noise at the entrance. He knew who it was despite the darkness.

"Am I risking my life to come in here, Imaro?" asked Pomphis.

The Bambuti was not joking. For the second time since he had met him, he was afraid of Imaro.

"No," Imaro replied.

- Is there enough light somewhere?

— Non.

"I'll get some, if you want.

— Non.

The single window let in a little of the moonlight and the stars, transforming Imaro into a shadowy silhouette, Bohu-like.

“I'll be leaving for Cush soon,” Pomphis announced. On the ***Khaiyah.*** Rakhma asked me to compose the story of everything that happened before the ***chephet*** was restored. It will take me a long time to finish it.

Imaro said nothing.

“I know you'll do a good job here,” Pomphis continued. You will make a great king. Who would dare to dispute your decisions?

Imaro does not react anymore.

“Imaro… About Tanisha. We didn't... We didn't want...

The warrior raised a hand. Pomphis understood that Imaro did not want to know more. But there was something else Pomphis wanted to say, whether Imaro wanted to hear it or not.

"When you left Tanisha and Kilewo behind after killing Bohu, it wasn't your fault," the Bambuti said. The Cloud Strider within you was dominant, and you were much closer to becoming a Strider than any human being before you. The Planeswalkers needed you to eliminate the Erriten. Nothing else mattered to them… Not even the lives of Tanisha and Kilewo.

There was a long, uncomfortable silence, then Imaro spoke.

“I didn't want them to be real,” he said, his voice so low it was almost inaudible. The Cloud Strider had nothing to do with it.

For once, Pomphis didn't know what to say.

“Take care of Tanisha and Kilewo,” Imaro said.

“I will, I promise. And take care of yourself, Imaro.

Imaro says nothing more. Pomphis didn't even see him nod. He knew he had told Imaro everything he could. He turned and left the

warrior's room, and tears welled up in his eyes as he walked back to Tanisha and Kilewo, for he was sure he would never see his friend again.

- You can not do that ! shouted the monomatapa.

The tension was like a storm about to break in the bedroom Mkwayo shared with Katisa. Imaro was there. At the warrior's feet lay the plate of armor stamped with the Lightning Bird, along with all of Imaro's insignia. At the top of the pile was ***the ubu-hlalu ;*** the purple pearl necklace which symbolized the links uniting Imaro to the Ngwika, the people of his father.

The warrior was dressed only in a simple loincloth, like the Abamba of Naama. A long sword hung by his side. He looked like any freed Abamba wandering the streets of the Lower City, not yet sure what he was going to do with his freedom.

Mkwayo was on his feet. Weakened as he was by his injury, however, he looked ready to strike Imaro. Katisa put a hand on his arm to calm him down.

"You can't do that," repeated the monomatapa, more gently.

“I can,” Imaro said calmly, “and I must.

"But why, Imaro?" Katisa asked, though she was sure she was.
know the reason.

- Yes ... ***Why?*** Mkwayo asked. Why turn away from this throne on which the Naama beg you to ascend?

"The Naama must find their own way," Imaro replied. All
like I have to find mine.

"Did your path not lead you here?"

- Nope. The path that led me here was blazed by others, he said, finally looking at Mkwayo and Katisa. All my life I have been pushed, pulled, dragged and manipulated. The Cloud Striders, the Mashataan, the Erriten, Bohu, the kandisa… All had their plans for me.
All these plans led me here. I did what the kandisa and the Cloud Striders wanted me to do. Now I have to find my way, and go my own way.

He paused for a few seconds, reading confusion in Mkwayo's eyes and understanding in Katisa's.

“Mkwayo,” Imaro said. You are a much bigger man than me. I could never have made an empire of Maguvurunde like you did. I

am proud to be your son.

The monomatapa lowered his arm and looked at his son for a long time in the eyes, again taking the measure of the warrior, as the first time they had met.

"And I'm proud to be your father," Mkwayo said finally.

Imaro nodded in acceptance of those words. Then he turned to Katisa.

“For many rains after you left me with the Ilyassai, I tried to forget you. Now I understand you. You weren't doing what you wanted. You were doing what you had to do.

Cross the hocha la tête.

“Peyisai needs you now. You must be to him what you weren't allowed to be to me.

"I'll help Peyisai," she said. But he is not my son. You're the.

Imaro nodded.

"Where are you going, Imaro?" Mkwayo asked. What will you do ?

“I will accompany Goab-tshui to the west coast, and once there… I will see.

"Will we see you again one day?" Katisa asked.

Imaro's lips curved in what was the faintest of smiles.

- Who knows ? he said.

And with that, he left the room.

Goab-tshui's ship set sail the next morning at dawn. As the masts of the ship moved away, the crowd of onlookers who had thronged so early to witness this departure began to disperse.

On the roof of an adjacent building, three people also attended the event: Mkwayo, Katisa, and Pomphis. Tanisha and Kilewo were not present, although Pomphis warned them.

They all three observed the ship leave the port bound for lands
that no Naama had trodden for hundreds of rains.

Pomphis raises his head and looks at Mkwayo and Katisa.

"Was it all worth it?" he asked.

Both knew what the Bambuti meant: that long chain of events that had been set in motion the day a sorcerer

had coveted a young virgin belonging to a warlike tribe from the vast yellow-grass lands of Tamburure.

"It was worth it for the Nyumbani," Mkwayo said. For Imaro… This will be up to him to decide.

They stood staring out to sea long after the ship had disappeared over the horizon.

Afterword

In the Shadows of the Tamburure

Charles R. Saunders was born in 1946 in a small town near Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. At a very young age, he was interested in science fiction and especially fantasy, which he discovered as a teenager. He was sixteen years old when Donald Wollheim undertook to republish the work of Edgar Rice Burroughs in paperback. For the covers, Wollheim called on a veteran of comics, Roy Krenkel, then, very quickly, on the young protege of this one, a certain Frank Frazetta. The golden youth of the American baby boom are enthralled by the dynamic covers of Frazetta and by these escapist novels. Burroughs (again) becomes for the American readership the master of adventure and popular entertainment. Discovering Tarzan in these conditions, the young Saunders, of African descent, had a different reaction from his contemporaries: "Burroughs' works were not really simple escape books for me, since the racism of the Tarzans made me feel bad. comfortable. Still, I really enjoyed the breadth of the author's imagination. At that time, I had absolutely no thought of
become a writer myself. »

In the wake of reissues of Burroughs and the great classics of the ***pulp magazine era,*** Lancer Books enters the ball rolling and publishes the stories of Conan by Texan Robert E. Howard. The success is phenomenal. The narrative force of Howard of course, but also, to an equally equal degree, the overpowering of the now legendary covers due to the same Frank Frazetta. We are at the beginning of 1966, Saunders' life has just change

“The second I started reading [the Conans], I was hooked, literally hooked! I always read science fiction on the side, of course, but in fantasy I found something that resonated more with me, perhaps awakening the soul of the storyteller there. Howard and Tolkien were then the two fashionable authors, but Saunders was much more attracted by the tone of Howardian stories than by elves and hobbits. He maintains today that it was the Texan author who made him want to write and that, even if he considers that he no longer owes him anything at this stage of his career, Howa

will always have a special place in [his] heart. Saunders' professional path then turned towards writing: "It was when I discovered fantasy that I discovered that I wanted to tell stories, to become a ***griot*** even though at the time I did not yet know this term. »

This personal discovery is made precisely when African Americans are immersed in one of the richest periods of their history: "I entered university in 1964 and graduated in 1968. There are few periods of the story where so much has happened in four years. It was moving in all directions. We went from three-piece suits and slicked back hair to Afro cuts and dashikis. Movements for integration into Black Power. From non-violent demonstrations to street riots. From hitting someone for calling you a 'nigger' to yelling ***'Black is beautiful'…*** " Saunders studied psychology at university, began to take an interest in African history and cultures, and begins to question his own readings. It doesn't take long for him to realize that black people are mostly absent or racially or stereotypically depicted in fantasy stories. He is thus outraged by Robert Heinlein ***'s Farnham's Freehold ,*** a science fiction novel in which blacks are polygamous cannibals, drug dealers and dreaming only of white women. Exceptions do exist, of course, but they are rare.

“I had a choice: either I stopped reading science fiction and fantasy, or I tried to do something, namely write my own stories, and try to get them published. At the time I was stupid enough to think I was capable of becoming a professional writer in what was a genre written by white people, published by white people, for white readers. »

Saunders' difficulty will not be so much to be published as to become professional, that is to say to be able to live from his pen.

The long period of maturation that marks the passage between his discovery of Howard, his desire to write, the end of his studies and the feeling of revolt he carries within him, gives birth to a character in 1970: Imaro, the first black hero of American fantasy. Saunders is twenty-four years old and, in the early days, Imaro is much more of an anti-something than a character in his own right. Saunders describes him as an "anti-Tarzan" and states that he was "designed to be the black guy who kicks Tarzan's ass". The tone is set.

Just like Howard who had the idea of Conan at first and worked out his "Hyborian Age" in the weeks that followed, Saunders decided to give a framework to the exploits of his hero. He calls his continent the Nyumbani (a Swahili word meaning "dwelling, home"), also conceived as an "antidote" (the word is from Saunders) to the name "Black Continent", in which the Anglo-Saxon authors project their fears and fantasies: "I followed the formula used by Robert E.
Howard when creating his Hyborian Age. I read a lot about African history, anthropology and folklore, as well as talked to a lot of Africans. I took real places and placed them on a parallel Earth where magic exists and African societies have developed in different ways. Looking back, I tell myself that I probably emulated Howard a little too much. I have used far too many names from the real Africa in my stories. Saunders was to regret this choice later, we will come back to this.

He wrote the first short story about Imaro in 1971, but it was not until 1974 that the first story featuring the character appeared, in ***Dark Fantasy. Dark Fantasy*** was a fanzine with literary pretensions designed by a young Canadian named Gene Day (who was later to become an illustrator of the ***Master of Kung-Fu*** series for Marvel, before dying very young, in 1982). Saunders having moved to Canada at the end of his studies, he decided to send his texts to Day, whose work impressed him. As a Canada Post strike threatens, Saunders makes the drive. Day invites him to stay at his house for a few hours, time taken advantage of by Saunders to admire Day's impressive collection, and by the latter to read the beginner's texts. When Day came out shortly after, he was thrilled and announced that he wanted to publish the most ambitious text that Saunders had brought him. This is "Mji-ya Wazimu" in its original version. However, the short story is far too long to appear in a single issue of the fanzine and the publication delays are such that a publication spread over several months seems unlikely. What does it matter! Day decided to publish it in two consecutive issues of his fanzine, which he released simultaneously. Thanks to Gene Day's enthusiasm, several Imaro stories would appear in his review and other fanzines of the time. Meanwhile, Lin Carter notices the story and decides to include it in his ***Year's Best Fantasy*** series.

(annual anthology featuring the best short stories of the year), published by Daw Books, just that!

The editor who seems most interested in this promising new author is the boss of Daw Books, who gave his initials to his publishing house: Donald A. Wollheim, him again. However, it will be several years before things materialize. Saunders only writes short stories, Wollheim wants novels. The two men will eventually find common ground. At first, Saunders will have to revise his texts to give them continuity, then embark on writing a real novel. At the beginning of 1981, Saunders received the contract from Daw Books (for three volumes), which made him a true professional author.

The fairy tale will however quickly turn into a nightmare.

When he received the proofs, he was appalled by the cover chosen by the publisher: “Imaro was drawn like a tanned Tarzan. I was outraged. Imaro was designed as an antidote to Tarzan, not a clone. »
Wollheim's strategy was to bet everything on the Tarzan parallel / opposition, and the proposed cover was additionally adorned with a subtitle that was misleading and, for Saunders, insulting: "the epic novel of a black Tarzan”.

The book, however, was never to appear with this cover. Alerted who knows how, the lawyers of Edgar Rice Burroughs Inc., the company which manages the rights derived from the work of the creator of Tarzan, threaten Wollheim with a lawsuit. Daw Books took no chances and decided to change the cover, which resulted in the initial release being delayed. ***Imaro*** finally came out in the last weeks of 1981, with his tanned Tarzan (illustrated by Ken Kelly, a sub-Frazetta) and the subtitle: "The Epic Novel of a Jungle Hero".

This insignificant delay in terms of schedule is in fact catastrophic for sales. ***Since Imaro*** did not appear at the initial office, booksellers were confused by his "reappearance" a few weeks later. The book is under-ordered, distribution is hesitant (due to lower reprints), and many booksellers are poorly stocked, if at all.
Sales are bad. The book is a failure.

Due to personal issues, it took Saunders two years to send the manuscript for the second Imaro. Like the first, it is made up of independent accounts, some specially written and others revised according to

initial publications in amateur or semi-professional journals.
Forming a coherent whole, the stories are connected in a more thoughtful way than in the first volume, but when this second volume finally appears, the first is no longer to be found. For the anecdote, the cover of this second collection (and the third book) is signed Jim Gurney, future creator of ***Dinotopia.*** The first volume being unavailable, what must happen happens: the sales of the second are bad.

Saunders, out of his personal problems, wants to believe in it, and he launches out for the first time in his career in the writing of a novel. This will be ***La Piste de Bohu.*** The book appeared in 1985. Heroic fantasy, which had dominated American sales for years, was no longer fashionable, drowned by an overdose of Conan subs (including numerous Conan pastiches). It will take a good fifteen years before publishers are interested again in the genre, and nearly twenty years before Imaro returns to bookstores.

In the meantime, Saunders is still writing, but there is no longer any question of getting published or making a professional living from his novels. He became a journalist and specialized in black issues and the history of the black community in the region of Nova Scotia, Canada, where he resides. He also writes non-fiction works on the same subject.

In the summer of 2003, Saunders received an email from a young Australian named Benjamin Szumskyj. The latter is then very active in the world of Howardian and Lovecraftian fanzines (for which he will direct several works). He explains to Saunders that he would like to see the complete Imaro published in volumes, and not remain out of print or unpublished (Saunders having never hidden that he wrote a fourth volume that remained unpublished.) Saunders prepares to send a polite response , but firm, to the young fan. He wants to explain to him that the primary reason behind the non-reappearance of Imaro's novels comes, this time, no longer from the world of publishing, but from himself, the unforeseeable consequence of a choice dating from the very conception of Imaro and the framework of his stories, the Nyu

"To develop Nyumbani, my parallel Africa, which serves as a framework for Imaro's adventures, I followed Robert E. Howard's recipe for building my universe: a part consisting of historical and mythological elements, as well as some very real names, and the other, purely imaginary. Mix everything well in the imagination, and serve on the printed page. »

Saunders therefore populates his Nyumbani with a number of tribes, ethnic groups or nations belonging to “real” Africa, as well as invented, distorted or disguised elements. It is thus easy to recognize the Maasai behind the Ilyassai with whom Imaro grew up. The Cush obviously refers to the mythical kingdom of the same name, contemporary with Egypt. The examples are numerous.

And in the lot, we find the Mwambututsi.

Known in France under the name of Tutsis, and in the United States under that of Tutsis or Watusi, the latter have the dubious reputation of being a race of giants, who are nicknamed the "aristocrats" of Africa... aftermath of the colonial era when Europeans saw in the Tutsis a people who could only have “white” origins (because of their sense of organization). The Europeans established a racial classification between Tutsis and Hutus (according to stupid criteria, even taking into account the era), and finally described them as "giants", mostly by photographing the tallest individuals next to them. 'short Europeans, photos that went around the world. This is how they appear in the film adaptation ***of King Solomon's Mines*** (1950) and in the Anglo-Saxon imagination in general. Saunders' intentions in featuring Watusi/Tutsis in a short story by Imaro are clear, and in line with his intentions for all episodes of the series, which he defines in those years as his company of "decolonization" of fantasy: he will use this material (aristocratic giants and mines) to reinterpret it. He no longer wanted to see what he found in abundance in Burroughs' novels, Africa seen as "a gigantic theme park, populated by ferocious beasts, savage black tribes, and teeming with lost white civilizations".

The Watusi/Tutsi thus arrived in Nyumbani under the name of Mwambututsi and the Hutus under the name of Kahutu, two tribes living in the kingdom of "Ruanda" (Rwanda is the usual Anglo-Saxon spelling). Both tribes feature prominently in a short story titled “Slaves of the Giant-kings,” which was part of the first volume published by Daw Books.

In this text, Imaro leads a rebellion of Kahutu slaves against their Mwambututsi masters. The Mwambututsi, operating in a gold mine, die massacred at the end of the story, in which, beyond

to announce the genocide, Imaro meets the one who will become the love of his life, Tanisha.

Saunders is very affected by the events of 1994. To such an extent that it is unthinkable for him to have a text republished, certainly written in the Seventies, but which seems to prophesy the massacres. Republishing the news, even accompanied by comments explaining the context and the date of composition, would be, for him, like a way of exploiting the genocide. And as the story marks the meeting with Tanisha, who plays a capital role in the series, the impossibility of republishing the short story leads in fact to the impossibility of republishing the series as such.

As Saunders prepares to respond to Szumskyj, an idea suddenly occurs to him: why not write a story that would ***replace*** the “Giant-Kings”? This would allow him to circumvent his problem, and to relaunch the project of a reissue.

Thus was born "the Afua", where Imaro and Tanisha meet for the first time a second time. By ricochet, the writing of this substitute story has consequences on other short stories in the series where this initial meeting was mentioned, but above all because of the personality of the "new" Tanisha, quite different from that of the first. version.
Saunders goes further and believes that Imaro comes out "changed" from the new "Afua". This rewriting is therefore heavy with consequences on all the stories that will follow, forcing Saunders to revise in depth a lot of his texts located chronologically after “the Afua”.

Saunders informed Szumskyj of his plan and, in the process, contacted publisher Night Shade, who had just republished the complete Kane short stories by Karl Edward Wagner. Wagner and Saunders are friends, Kane and Imaro are the only worthy representatives of the heroic fantasy of the American landscape of the seventies. The choice is logical. The case is signed.

Discussing the editorial work to be done on the series, the editors of Night Shade suggested that Saunders write a short story that would mark the end of the haramia era of ***Imaro*** 's life. Saunders reflects and embarks on what will become "Blood Betrayal". Another ricochet, the events of this short story form a logical and natural conclusion to the first part of Imaro's life. It is therefore decided, during the publication by Night Shade, to conclude the first volume on "Treason of blood" and to postpone the news which concluded the first volume at Daw at the head of the

second of the new edition. This is how "Mji-ya-Wazimu", which marks the beginning of the friendship between Imaro and Pomphis, changed places. On rereading, the choice is obvious, the logical thing, and the first two volumes gain enormously in coherence.

New hard blow for Saunders: after two volumes, Night Shade decides to interrupt the series. Saunders waited a bit, but soon self-published the last two volumes ***(La Piste de Bohu,*** a revised reissue of the first edition from 1985), and ***La Guerre du Naama,*** unpublished, thus bringing the series to a conclusion. A tentative conclusion?

Imaro's particularly long and complex story is reminiscent (again!) of the fate of Howard's Conan short stories. Another common point to note: the two authors wrote texts which do not belong to the cycle strictly speaking; thus, for Saunders, texts staging Pomphis, Katisa, Imaro, or which simply have the Nyumbani as their setting.

None have yet been reissued as a collection...

Published in the form of short stories for some, revised, sometimes revisited, written and rewritten over several decades, the adventures of Imaro have something of the kaleidoscope, between the indignation of youth and maturity, between the assassination of Martin Luther King and globally successful integration.

The first texts are in this sense very representative of their time. Imaro was indeed born in 1970; it is not possible to doubt it. The short story "Mwenni" (published in ***Fantasy Crossroads*** in 1976 in its initial version) is undoubtedly the text that best symbolizes the era, somewhere between ***Shaft,*** the Blaxploitation films, and the fashion for kung-fu and Eastern philosophies. Heroic fantasy is often the refuge of the left behind, of ***the underdog,*** and this short story demonstrates it perfectly. It will be, according to everyone's taste, very dated, or will have taken on a small ***vintage*** patina for the most beautiful effect.

This altogether quite pleasurable aspect should not make us forget that Saunders launched his series as a cry and a decolonization enterprise. Saunders willingly quotes Sir Rider Haggard and ***King Solomon's Mines, the*** first novel written by an Anglo-Saxon set in Africa, which was to have the influence that we know on all the literature of the imagination. We therefore discover, in "Mji-ya-Wazimu", an indignant Saunders. The Mizungu of the short story are yet another avatar of the lost white tribe that we find in so many novels of the genre. The Mizungu – “white people”

civilized" – are cruel, slaveholders, and guilty of nameless atrocities on the indigenous peoples of Nyumbani, whom they nickname "na-gah", an appellation in which it is difficult not to see the transposition of the word ***nigger.***

The evolution is obvious between the first two volumes of the series, where Saunders lets the "angry young man" in him speak, and the last two, where he considers that he has completed his work of decolonization and can finally embark on stories. using African material for itself and in itself.

Saunders, like Howard before him, and like Karl Wagner with him, is one of the rare authors to think that it takes something other than a muscular man in underpants, a wandering woman and a dragon to make a good heroic story. fantasy. He therefore draws on this material often unknown to most of his readers (both American and French), to give substance to his series. May be aware of this misunderstanding, the disguises adopted by Saunders are clearly more transparent than those of How

La Piste de Bohu is, in this respect, an incomparable success, which draws on a phenomenal quantity of African sources, such as the Bird of Lightning, the monomotapa (monomatapa at Saunders), or the ***mchawi.*** The central plot of the book – the manipulations of Bohu which launches two parallel conflicts – is a remarkable example of this. The ***mfecane,*** massive destruction undertaken by Shingane, obviously refers to the real ***mfecane,*** the systematic conquest operation of Chaka, founder of the Zulu kingdom. Shingane's very name seems to be a contraction of that of Chaka and his half-brother Dingane. The other tragic episode of the novel, the famine which the young prophetess Nongkwaze involuntarily launches, again through Bohu, is a terrifying copy of the prophecies of the young Nonqawuse who, in 1856, declared having heard voices and to be entertained with the spirits of two of her ancestors. "She claimed that the spirits had told her that the power of the Xhosa [her tribe] would be restored, the dead raised from their ashes, the cattle and vegetables renewed, and the whites driven out, if the Xhosa people consented to slaughter all their herds. , burning its crops and destroying its food reserves. Tens of thousands of people died as a result of this prophecy, behind which some saw a manipulation of the young girl by the white governor of Cape Town or by the chief of the Xhosa tribe, which Saunders synthesizes into Bohu.

Finally, the location of the Naama tribe, an aristocratic people with very light skin reigning over a society of black slaves, in the very south of Nyumbani, in an account written in the 1980s, leaves little doubt about the symbolic significance of the final novel in the series.

Beyond these historical-legendary and geographical elements, the richness of the Imaro series also comes from its characters. Imaro is a frighteningly complex individual, whose inner torments are miles away from what one can find by reading Tarzan or Conan. Imaro is a heroic fantasy character, but he is a modern representative, quick to question, like Wagner's Kane, or Michael Moorcock's Elric. Hence also the richness of the secondary characters. The family question, and particularly filial, is undoubtedly the hidden heart of the series (children abandoned, unloved, sacrificed, multiple and absent fathers). The family issues raised in Imaro's saga are difficult to consider among his Anglo-Saxon colleagues in the terms posed by Saunders, which cover typically “Nyumbanian” realities.

Just look at the scene of ***the icantu :*** Imaro ***thanks*** Nomvula for having had ***the icantu made,*** because it allows him to better bear the pain of the loss of his wife and son. Any Anglo-Saxon hero would have jumped up in rage and howled at Nomvula's betrayal. Imaro ***thanks her.***
In revisiting these texts today, it is moreover difficult not to make the connection with the family obsessions of a GRR Martin, and Pomphis the Bambuti, a pygmy who learned to wield the diplomatic and intellectual weapon to be at even to survive in a world that lives by force and likes to ridicule small people, is not without announcing Tyrion Lannister.

Imaro is an unfairly misunderstood series, of rare richness and originality. It appears for the first time in the world in its entirety in a case worthy of its quality. We bet that she will be able to go beyond the circle of the ***happy few*** to meet the success she amply deserves.

Patrice Louinet

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